

Seven & Eva
In French's Forest

Rian Torr

“The lady, with guile in heart,
Came early where he lay;
She was at him with all her art
To turn his mind her way.”
-Sir Gawain And The Green Knight
Anonymous

“In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who
at heart was not a little tinctured with
superstition, made frequent allusion to the
ancient popular notion, which regarded all
black cats as witches in disguise.”
-The Black Cat,
Edgar Allen Poe

“She is the most Egyptian of all...for her eyes
are as green as the Nile, her hair as feathery as
papyrus, and her skin the pink of a lotus
flower.”
-The Egyptian Cinderella pink of a lotus
flower.”

for Sarah

I
Other Woman
From The Woods

i Lady Faye Of French's Forest

“Eva ...” Seven said, lightly touching his new love's porcelain knee.

She had been slipping in and out of consciousness for about an hour now, leaning into his shoulder—her drool smeared across his plaid sleeve.

He delicately brushed some stray red locks from her face.

It made him nervous that she was sleeping so much, and he was glad they would soon be arriving--when she would wake again, and he could relax.

He longed for her companionship in the deepest sense. Even when she only drifted off ever so lightly, he felt more alone—and more lost.

When she was gone into the oblivion of sleep—he was more exposed to the visions—left vulnerable and helpless.

The old fears would creep back in. The

black clouds would again roll overhead. He would once more grow anxious.

Faye would fall in sight, on every strand of wind and traffic—and he would hear her mad voice cackling at him:

*'Come show me your Lucky Hands,
Seven ... Show me your Lucky Hands!!! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha, Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha ... SHOW ME ... YOUR LUCKY ... H-A-A-A-A-A-NDS!!! AH-HA HA HA HA! AH-HA-HA-HA-HA ...!'*

She would tell him she was coming for him, and that he couldn't run for long.

She would tell him she was the only one for him, and that he couldn't ignore the match their fate had made in hell.

She would tell him that they belonged together forever—behind the bent boughs of French's Forest.

ii

One time, a few months earlier, when Eva was in chemotherapy for breast cancer, Seven had been pacing about the waiting area, when he had suddenly felt nauseous.

He ran to the washroom, splashed water on his face, looked in the mirror—and there was Faye, standing right behind him.

The yellow-black coil of her pet anaconda

Ax wrapped snugly about her silver curves.

Her eyes were orange orbs blazing out hotter than all the suns in heaven, and long, fiery red dread-locks danced upon her head.

Silver razors tied into the tip of each braid scratched at the air, snapping in electric currents that cracked when the locks collided.

Ax started to coil and tighten spasmodically about Faye's body.

"Bring the bitch to me," she hissed, her forked black tongue flicking hungrily over jagged black fangs.

She pointed one long black nail at him—as Ax tensed up to strike.

"Yiiiiiii-aaa-aaa!" Seven shouted--and spun about—but she was gone--almost as if she was never there at all.

Relief cascaded over him--yet her dark spirit lingered about the air.

She was the silver-skinned siren of the deep, who he once called his Forest Queen—but who was just another elven trickster.

She was of a deadlier seduction--inclined to prettier forms, when traps of mischief and sadism were high on her mind.

With trepidation, he looked into the mirror again, but she was not there--and he sighed.

His breathing gradually calmed.

He wiped his brow with his sleeve.

Somehow, he knew that, if he lingered long, she would be back to claim what she thought was rightfully hers.

He made a hasty retreat to the waiting room.

Eva came through the chemotherapy with her usual self-assured flourish--and he never told her about what had happened.

He had never told her about Faye at all. He had really thought that Faye would never find him beyond the wood. At least, that's what he had really wanted to believe.

But a few months after first meeting Eva, he ended up switching jobs—when his visions of Faye began to return.

He was on an earlier shift-- waking up while Eva slept in—and it was during this period that Faye's presence began to grow.

He had spotted her first in the hot shower steam, coming through the bathroom door.

“Who's that?” he said trembling--barely audible to even himself.

The shower door flung open.

Faye's silver frame writhed there before him. She wailed like a banshee, shaking about her crimson mane of silver-toothed snakes.

Her sonic cry punched him back against the

stall wall—pinning him there like a rag doll.

But then she took on an even bigger breath and threw another volley of sonic missiles into his chest—roughly thrusting him up into the blunt end of the shower nozzle, gashing his head at the crown.

She stopped and he crumpled to the stall floor, hitting his head again, on the soap-holder—and landing into a powerless heap under the stinging water needles.

Later, when he awoke--soaked and shivering--she was gone.

But ever afterward, she returned again to haunt him--each morning while Eva slept.

Once, he saw her out of the breakfast table window, flitting between the clouds. He had spilled his cereal milk all over his fresh shirt.

Another time, when he took the garbage downstairs, he had seen her hanging by the electrical box in the basement, caught in a giant spider-web—cackling:

*'Show me your Lucky Hands, Seven!!!
Wha-ha-ha-ha, wha-ha-ha-ha-hah ... Show me
those Lucky Hands!!!'*

He had backed away, steadily up the stairs.

*'You never told me you loved me, did you
Seven!' she had wailed. 'You never told me you
loved me!!! COWARD!!!'*

He had slammed the door shut on her, never looking back.

Another time, she appeared on his walk to work, in between the traffic, when a bus passed through her—and she melted into the haze of morning exhaust.

The encounters became increasingly frequent--and she became increasingly threatening—so that he ended up switching shifts again, in order to avoid her.

iii

So Seven started sleeping by Eva's clock, to the point where he wouldn't get out of bed before her, in case she fell back under.

But it seemed to work. Faye appeared less and less--and he grew confident again. He felt relieved to be free of her curse.

Meanwhile, Eva never even asked why he insisted on sleeping in sync with her—as in form with her typical grace, she just shrugged it off as another one of his idiosyncrasies.

She was never the type to care about love's funny little things. As long as he wanted her, then that was all that really mattered. As long as he cared, she would whole-heartedly love him right back.

All she ever asked was that he stayed fond.

Indeed, it got so bad that, even if she passed out in the middle of a movie, Seven nudged her awake—bugging her to stay alert, just to dash his fears Faye was on the hunt again.

But Eva didn't mind. It made her feel important, and she often reassured him by saying, "It's okay, babe. It'll be okay," without even knowing what was wrong.

So, he saw less and less of Faye, and then almost not at all—which was about the time he finally let Eva talk him into visiting with his family in French's Forest.

"Where?" she had said, when he first told her the name of his little wood town. Her face had grown long and dreadfully bloodless.

"Have you ever heard of it?"

"No! Never," she had professed, almost too emphatically.

Just then, the train started pulling past more familiar factories at the city outskirts—and Seven knew that they would soon be pulling into station.

"Eva," he said again.

"Yes babe?" she murmured, half-dreaming.

She casually brushed a red bang back from her ivory forehead. Her freckles were more pronounced today—and the line of her jaw seemed especially feline.

He felt better already now, just having heard her voice. “Welcome back to New London, sweetheart,” he said, taking a moment to admire her heaven-sent features.

From the first second that they had ever met, he had swooned for her slinky ways—mesmerized by her big cat eyes, and whiny put-on sighs.

A loose eyelash dashed across her porcelain cheek.

The folding shadows of passing poles and lines complicated the planes of her face--highlighting for him an underlying tension to her otherwise steady demeanor.

She had her own issues she was hiding, of course--like anybody else—but he only ever loved her all the more for her flaws.

Her eyes yawned wide.

She slipped the window shade up all the way to see the big city sliding slickly by. “Oh, I’m so excited,” she cooed. “I haven’t even been back since we met.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to get a room in town?” he had said, checking out his watch.

He wanted to put off the family reunion for as long as possible—for he knew full well the moment they crossed the county line, their fate would lie in Faye’s merciless hands.

Deep down, he knew that, if Faye were jealous enough, she would set French's Forest ablaze—yet he couldn't worry about that now. He had to try to stay positive.

“No, I want to stay at your parent's place, like we said ... I think it'll be fun, and a good way for us all to get to know each other better. I can't believe its been this long, and I haven't even met them yet ...”

Seven had been stalling from introducing her to the family because of Faye. He didn't want anything to spoil his budding love.

But now they were headed into the wicked siren's den, and he knew very well, despite his best hopes for a seamless visit—that it may soon be time to come clean.

Their train arrived after dark, and they cabbed around Victoria Park to see the evergreens glittering, all dressed down in shimmering gowns of a thousand colored lights.

Beyond the trees, over the gloomy uptown buildings, a red rose moon dawned, dropping a warm aura over the evening.

“Ooo-ooo ... It feels like magic tonight, and the trees are so pretty ... Look, it's the rink where we met ... Ooo-ooo-oh ... babe, do you want to stop before we go?” she pleaded, flashing him her lover eyes.

“Maybe we should come back tomorrow.”

“As long as we don't forget ... As long as we really do go back ...”

“I promise.”

“Remember how I almost fell, turning on the ice and you caught me?”

“We both went down ...”

She giggled. “You broke my fall ... Remember how I asked you the time ... I still remember--”

“Me too ...”

“You looked at your bare wrist and said: 'Seven.'”

“I didn't want to break the moment.”

“Then, over by the fountain, I noticed you weren't wearing a watch, and you said, 'Oh, I was just guessing about the time earlier.’”

“I remember.”

“Silly me,' I said. 'I haven't even asked you your name yet ..’”

“Seven,' I said. I remember your eyes bulged wide like you'd seen a ghost.”

Eva pouted quizzically, as if she couldn't remember. “Is that your answer for everything?' I said.”

“I was embarrassed.”

“Then whenever you asked me a question I automatically said: 'Seven.’”

He snickered. "I just got so frustrated."

"You loved the attention, just like when I fawned over your delicate hands--and you got all embarrassed—but you secretly liked it ... Remember how you said they were your *Lucky Hands*, because they had caught *me* ...?"

"It's still true."

"Aww, well ... It was hard not to fall for that one. I made you tell all of my girlfriends why you had *Lucky Hands*."

"And I told them—gladly."

She grinned. "Promise we go back? Please, please, please ...? You know I always love to go back."

"Yes babe, we can even pretend we're strangers again, you know ... We can pretend to bump into each other for the first time ... We can fall down on the frozen path ... Remember how you said that the paths were like rivers streaming together?"

"Yes I remember, and I think that would be funny and cute for us to do," she said, nearly squealing.

Their pinky fingers curled together in an unsaid bond of trust.

They had good conversations, but it was their silences that sealed their sweetheart deals—saving words for less honest exchanges.

She leaned against him, and he could hear her heart beat on his, as they listened to the drone of traffic--and wallowed in fresh memories of their early romance.

They rolled along under the downtown lights and signs for a time--and then out into the white and black countryside toward French's Forest and Seven's old family home.

Idle chat continued to linger on a spell, before dissolving into contemplation and country stars.

Seven cast back to when he was four, when his family still lived in the old house on Lake Heron.

In those days, every hour was an eternity—and life was a wonder. For much of his youth, he was an explorer entrenched in his own private sylvan stomping grounds—engaged with both the mystical and the mundane--and the beautiful and the deadly.

He had been as happy as a kid could have conceivably been—given the circumstances.

But it was only after meeting Eva that he remembered again what it was like to be truly content. She had made him feel special, whole—and unique once more.

She had made him feel loved--and willing to become desperately loyal, like he hadn't felt

since Faye.

Sometimes Eva acted jealous, leaving him loathing her—soured by the control games—but for the most part, they got along like fireworks.

Put in a room without windows, they went at it dawn-to-dawn—lost to the day or month. Their flame was plenty alive, and their mutual rapture was evident in their eyes locking in the mirror as they made love.

Eventually the highway carved itself into woodland.

The moon was still fully visible overhead, sitting bright and fat upon the tree-line crown.

The cab hugged the inner curve of the road for many long moments, and only when it seemed the snaking lane would never straighten--it did--and they were upon the house.

The dark soldier trunks of French's Forest fell back to reveal sprawling water gardens and a sparkling back-set mansion.

Innumerable stringed lights slithered back-and-forth along the roof and trim—setting the abode ablaze in a brilliant aura that effortlessly shouldered the night.

Gravel popped under their tires as they rolled up the drive-lane toward the front door.

“Oooh, its beautiful!”

“They pay a guy.”

They pulled up to the entrance and the driver popped the trunk. Seven grabbed their bags from the back and slipped the guy a twenty.

Growing impatient, Eva skipped up the steps toward the house.

Mid-way up, she twirled about on her tippy-toes, letting her long dark red hair fan out about her shoulders. She was a natural blond, but she preferred to dye her hair red.

Silhouetted by the porch lights, she giggled. "Your folks really live here?"

Seven nodded and picked up after her.

They embraced.

"I hope they like me."

"What's not to like?" he said, offering her his hand.

She took it, and they mounted the remaining steps together.

He hammered the ugly gargoyle knocker seven times--then paused on the eighth, when he heard footsteps shuffling up.

"Hold your dark horses! For crying in heaven's pain!"

For a moment, Eva thought she saw her own face in the gargoyle knocker.

But then a bolt snapped open--and the door swung in.

Godwin leaned out.

He had a silver crow's peak that ran crooked along a furrowed brow, with potted cheeks which fell in mid-leer-- as his thin, jagged lips pursed together in a permanent wince.

"Well hello, strangers!" he rasped, his complexion waxing ashen. He gingerly pinched a glass brimming with a crimson brew, sloshing it casually from side-to-side, splattering the front stoop and railing.

"Godwin, you're getting your drink everywhere," Seven said.

"So you must be Eva?" Godwin said.

"Nice to finally meet my boy's new fawn."

An almost imperceptible grin pierced his lips.

His fangs were just bared, tiny tips glistening in the porch-light.

His ears twitched with a devilish restlessness—as his mind clearly raced with a carnal cleverness.

Seven cleared his throat harshly.

Eva put out one trembling hand.

Godwin's eyes throbbed in a ghoulish delight. His brows bounced in brightening expectation.

"Easy," Seven growled.

Godwin grabbed Eva's hand and pulled her uncomfortably close. She accommodated him

with an awkward smile back—and a small hug.

But then he began to tighten his grip and she cried out: “Owww-eeee!!!”

Plus, he didn't let go at first. Instead, he looked slowly up and down, mapping her lean, tender body--with his taut, calculating mind.

She froze, like a fawn before the hunter, too afraid to let her natural obstinacy fuel a confrontation over his affront.

She simply swallowed hard and tried to act as if nothing was afoot.

His tongue curled up over his sharp teeth thoughtfully.

“Godwin, could you please let the poor girl in the door, honestly ...” Seven said, intervening. “We've been on the rails all day, just give us a break.”

“Of course,” Godwin grumbled, finally submitting--easing out of Eva's personal space.

As Eva slipped on past him, however, he inhaled deeply. “Marvelous roast though, my dear boy,” he whispered in Seven's ear, accent dripping in a wet sub-text. “I'll take mine rare.”

Seven stiff-armed his way past the old man, sick of his games.

Eva eyed them both over her shoulder warily.

Godwin filed their coats in the front closet.

Then he said, "Please, allow me ..." and he gently led Eva into the next room--where he promptly spilled his drink on her blouse.

"Damn hades!"

Seven wedged himself between them.

"Waste of a good drink, dad ..."

"Marietta...!" Godwin shouted, face blushing. "Marietta ...! Bring napkins! Napkins! I swear by Jupiter, it just jumped out of my hand, Seven!"

Eva sat down and sighed. Her best laid plans for good familial first impressions were quickly being dashed.

"I heard my name!" a shrill voice called out from upstairs.

Footsteps shuffled overhead--and a moment later--Marietta glided into the room, terracotta nightgown billowing behind her like a second skin.

She was a slender woman in her fifties, with her hair up in a bun—and jowls just beginning to show at the cheeks. The essence of a prior beauty still lingered there, in her younger terrains.

Godwin retired behind the bar into the shadows of glasses and bottles—so that they could not see his face well, and he was out of reach of casual conversation.

Eva sat on the couch, straight and proper, so she could see everybody better, still willing enough for her part, to keep the keel of the evening straight throughout.

She was determined that, if anything soured, it wouldn't be her fault.

Seven sat down beside her and patted her knee reassuringly.

Outside, the wind cried, blowing open the front bay windows, with the drapery whipping about, exposing the naked moon.

In the distance, from the fathoms of French's Forest, a feral choir of coyotes howled ominously.

Shivers coiled up Eva's spine, causing her to spit and sputter to catch her share of breath.

Seven sensed Faye's deepening menace, as the air grew heavy—and the ground felt alive and electric.

“Do you want me to put your blouse in the dryer?” Marietta offered.

“It's just a spot, it'll be fine,” Eva chirped. She began biting her nails.

“Are you okay?”

“I'm fine.”

“I'm sorry,” Seven said, shaking his head and rubbing his face—beginning to regret coming home.

“Why are you sorry? I'm fine, really,” Eva said, doing her best to feign confidence.

Marietta closed the windows.

“These darned things always blowing open ...” she said.

She sat down again, folding her hands in her lap. “So anyway, you're here ...! It's nice to finally meet the woman of my boy's dreams ...”

Eva blushed. “More like *his* biggest admirer, really ...”

Marietta frowned. “But you must tell me,” she said. “Are you educated, my dear?”

Eva swallowed down the wrong pipe and choked and coughed.

Seven rubbed her back. “Mom, please ... Eva has a Master's degree in Psychology.”

“Oh dear, did I say something wrong then? I'm so, so sorry ... I guess it's just that motherly instinct in me, Seven,” she said. “I just don't want you to get your heart broken again ... You know how foolish you've been in love.”

Seven put his face in his hands, as if to whimper, but instead he began massaging his eyes.

Now it was Eva's turn to reassure him. She rubbed his back, to show him that she wasn't yet irreversibly offended by his mother's digs.

He began to feel better after awhile and relaxed.

“Could I fix you some tea, dear?”

“No, please ... I'm fine,” Eva said. “Just swallowed down the wrong pipe is all.”

“So did you two get a chance to go by Victoria Park when you were in town?”

“Yes we did! It was so beautiful,” Eva said, glowing at the chance to turn the tide of talk.

“That's nice. Godwin and I try to make it once a year, on a full moon ...

“Just because it's prettier,” Godwin added, flashing his fangs from the shadows.

Eva nodded. “We met at the rink, so it's kind of meaningful.”

“Oh well, isn't that sweet?” Marietta said. “Aren't you just a sweet young dear?”

Eva shook her head and blushed, trying to decide whether she was being mocked or mollified.

“So tell me, Eva ... Are you sure that you want to get involved with someone like my son Seven? I mean, let's be honest here—we both know he's not exactly the best catch ever ... So I have to ask ... What on earth are you getting out of this?”

Eva's jaw fell slack. She squirmed in her seat.

Seven flushed.

“I mean, just between us,” Marietta

continued. She leaned toward Eva--and said loudly under her breath: "Isn't he a little *crazy*?"

Eva shook her head confused by the cruelty. She glared at Seven in horror.

"Slow it down mother ... We just got here ... Eva doesn't need to be smothered like this ..."

"Ok, ok ... I'm sorry ... I guess I get a little too protective of my cub sometimes ..." she said, stood up, stepped over—and petted Seven on the head.

He growled—then quickly reigned in his temper. He remembered that she was his mother--and she was allowed to say these sorts of things.

He retreated to the bar, where Godwin poured him a shot of something sweet and dark.

Eva looked freshly discomforted by her sudden abandonment on the couch.

Just then, Seven's step-brother Olin sauntered into the room. "Well, well, well ... Who have we here?" he oozed.

His slick wintry skin of blue and gray tints deftly netted Eva's attention. He walked over to her, took her hand in his own—and promptly licked its full back length.

She pulled away in disgust, her face contorting into a twisted grimace.

He removed his glasses and looked down

into her deep blue eyes, his own eyes ablaze in lust.

She gasped. She felt herself spiraling in toward him, consumed by a manic mesmerism.

He smirked wickedly, revealing a mob of blood-stained incisors.

She fainted, flopping against the back of the sofa.

“Easy bro,” Seven said, bending over her protectively. He brushed a hair from her cheek. “This is my girlfriend, Eva.”

She came back around a minute later, and Seven helped her re-adjust—holding her close.

Olin picked up his guitar from next to the glass table. “Very well then, dear brother--but at least let me play a melody for her ... As an *apologia*, for my rudeness” he said, light flecks sparkling in his eyes.

Eva moaned, cupping her forehead. “What happened?”

“You passed out.”

“My head is killing me.”

“Oh, I might have something for that,” Marietta said--and fetched her some prescription strength codeine and a tumbler of water, which she took right away.

Olin strummed a G chord—and then let it die--his eyes getting lost in Eva's fleshy young

lines.

She looked away, but still felt violated. She tried to affect airs of being bored rigid by his boldness—but he only grew more intrigued.

Seven growled protectively.

“Okay, okay ...” Olin said, reverting into etiquette instead of hostility. “I’m sorry brother, I get a little carried away ... but when you bring such a beauty home with you, what do you expect of me...?”

He strummed the G again, and made an instrumental song up as he went along—to the Dm and the Am—wherever he had to go to follow his whimsical pick.

Eva wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. Seven felt abysmally embarrassed. Marietta frowned about her typically invasive son. Godwin simply listened--sipping his wine in the corner.

Olin finished shortly—played on more simple melody that he wanted to share--and then set the guitar down again, against the glass coffee table by Eva’s knees.

As he did so, he casually leaned over Eva, taking in her scent.

She cleared her throat: “A-hem!”

“You looked flushed,” he whispered in her ear.

“More like pissed off,” she intoned dryly,

grasping for calm in her voice.

She had dealt with plenty of jerk-off's during her bar-tending days, and the natural bitch reaction was kicking in.

"Olin," Marietta hissed, interrupting the tense exchange. "Olin ... those coyotes reminded me of something ... Do you remember the time they came for breakfast, Olin? Do you remember?" she said, forcing herself into a nervous laughter--snapping her fingers rapid-fire in his face.

Olin was on the brink of having a rapture if she didn't shake him out of it fast.

"Remember your mouth full of bacon and your eyes bulging from their sockets, Olin? Do you remember?" she said, resorting to slapping him.

He winced, but seemed unswerving in his sinister focus.

"Remember how I thought you were choking?" she said—slapping him again harder.

Just before she was about to halt her assault in defeat, a sea-change in his face informed her that she had finally succeeded in calming him down—and she could discontinue her advance.

"They were very hungry," Olin said vacantly, staring off into nowhere. "Those coyotes were pretty thirsty."

Eva awkwardly re-crossed her legs the other way—and Olin's eyes raced again.

“NO!” Marietta scolded him for even thinking it.

Then she turned on Eva. “Don't act so nervous, girl,” Marietta instructed her sternly. “It only makes them edgier,” she said, herself even now heaving in emotion.

Olin sat down on the floor by Eva's feet.

Eva turned to Seven and mouthed: ‘*What the ... ?!?*’ She subtly rolled her eyes around behind her, toward Marietta.

Seven shrugged subtly.

“I'll be right back with tea,” Marietta said. “Olin, come with me, for your own good ... Olin--”

“Just a few more minutes,” Seven whispered to Eva.

“Sooo” Olin began, which usually led to mischief. “Any sign of Faye yet, dear brother ...?”

“No,” Seven said.

“Who?” Eva said.

“Brother's ex, *Faye*,” Olin said emphatically—grinning evilly.

A faint recognition of the name skipped across Eva's consciousness, like a flat stone over water—until finally sinking down and out of sight for good.

“So are you going to play us a song then, Olin--or what?” Seven said, trying to change the subject.

“Faye ...?” Eva growled.

“Don't worry, she's a ghost,” Seven said. “He's only talking about a stupid phantom.”

“Okay, please explain ... because I am totally confused now.”

“Sure,” Seven said, clearing his throat. “A-hem ... Well ... I should say, technically, she *is* real--but she doesn't come out that much anymore.”

“Come out?” Eva asked, her lower lip trembling. “Come out from where?”

“French's Forest,” Olin answered. “Lady Faye haunts the wood here.”

A hush fell on them all.

Seven nodded, relieved to have avoided actually saying the words aloud himself.

Upon hearing the words herself for the first time, Eva felt light-headed—and overwhelmed by the sensation that someone else was in her skin.

“I'll explain it all later,” Seven said, hoping that would be enough to diffuse the quagmire for now.

“Say, seven ... Did your ex Ruby's scars ever heal, after the last time Faye attacked her?”

Eva gasped. “I swear on my grave, you

two ... If this is some kind of joke—I'm going to hit both of you.”

“Ruby was fine,” Seven said, frowning.

Olin nodded, grinning wildly.

Seven sighed in familial frustration.

“Well, we’ve had a long day,” he found himself saying, trying to avoid the entire topic of Faye—and their triangle-amour, for as long as possible. “Eva and I had better pass on tea and just get some rest, or we'll just be big grouches tomorrow ...

“We can catch up over breakfast ... okay Marietta?”

“Oh boo,” his mother said from the kitchen. She marched back into the room, balancing a gilded tray of cups and saucers in one hand. “And I was just starting to like having a human being around, for a change.”

Eva chuckled nervously, thinking she sensed a compliment—when something told her it was just the opposite.

“Cutting out so soon now?” Godwin prodded from the corner. “People,” he said, shaking his head in dismay.

He took another shot and flipped the page on his magazine.

“I'm sorry, we don't mean to be rude,” Eva said. “We're just tired.”

“My bedroom's at the end of the hall,” Olin called out after them. “In case you get bored with him!” he said, cackling.

“Go to hell,” Seven shouted back.

“We're already there, you know that, brother!” Olin retorted. “Nobody leaves French's Forest, Seven! Stop fooling yourself! It's in your blood, brother ... *She's* in your blood.”

Once they were out of earshot, Eva squeezed Seven's hand as hard as she could.

He winced.

“Okay, who is Olin talking about?”

“Oh, nobody. I'll tell you everything in the morning ...”

“But what's with this Faye chick, then? She's some old girlfriend you never told me about, isn't she?”

“Let's just leave it alone for now, okay?” he said, his tone growing tense.

“Okay, okay, Mr. Grumpy--sheesh,” she grumbled. “But you do realize your family is crazy, right?”

He laughed. She poked him in the side.

When they reached the first landing, she swung him about. “Piggy-back me?” she pleaded.

Seven huffed and bent over—but he secretly loved their little games, even when she was a little bit too bossy.

She jumped on his back and they mounted the remaining steps together, adrift in the eddies of romance all fawns in love enjoy.

They rolled over onto the guest bed, under a heavy-knit duvet.

Between cool covers, their limbs entangled and lips crushed in petal-soft passions.

Their hearts roared in their bond's innocence. Their fire had yet to falter.

If their world ended that night, they would have left it in peace with each other.

"They're so crazy ..." Eva whispered in his ear. "Yet, somehow they think you're the crazy one," she said.

"I know, I know."

"Difference with me is," she purred. "I *know* you're the crazy one," she said, and poked him in the side again.

"Hey now!" Seven said, exploding into laughter. He couldn't remember ever being happier. She made him feel loved and wanted--and he couldn't imagine ever being with another woman again.

He felt like life was complete, and nothing would ever come between them.

"You are so beautiful," he said. "I could just love you forever. I could just kiss you all day and never stop. I would never need to kiss another

girl again.”

“Awww, really? You're pretty cool too.”

“Hey!”

“I'm just kidding,” she said, and poked him again. “You're the world to me, Seven. But tell me something, did you notice tonight, that Olin's teeth were all red?”

“No, I didn't ... He was probably just drinking red wine. He loves his red wine.”

“But ... also ... he looks kind of like a ... like a--”

“--like a *vampire*?”

“No ... I was going to say like a *goth*.”

“Oh right, like a goth. You got it. He's acts all bad-ass, and gets into a lot of trouble—but deep down, he's just as human as me.”

“So how did you turn out so well?”

“I don't know. Sometimes I think I was adopted, and other times I think I'm just some kind of half-breed. Godwin isn't my natural father, mind you—so there could be some truth to that.”

She giggled. “Well, you better keep your inner Olin away from me, because I wouldn't sleep a wink,” she whispered in his ear.

“Haha, not tonight, babe. Not with my parents in the house, I couldn't ...”

“Oh, you spoil sport ... Are you scared of getting caught? Awww, isn't that cute ...”

“Okay, okay ... hold on,” he said and turned on the radio.

Silken jazz filled the room.

Eva laughed and slapped him lightly on the cheek.

He acted shocked and unamused. But then he kissed her back hard, trailing his tongue down her neck.

She arched her back gasping.

Just then, Seven sensed an innate urge to tear her jugular open with his teeth—but he quickly translated that force into rather pleasuring her more deeply.

He had learned to do this on a subconscious level, never admitting to himself that the basic desire to kill indicated his psyche was terribly off-kilter.

Plus, in just as twisted a bent, below the surface of her more civilized mores, Eva *knew* Seven was dangerous—and somehow it only turned her on all the more.

ii The Fawning Of Lady Faye

Sometime after the bed-shaking sex, just as Orion was slipping through the star-shaped frame of their guest room's skylight--Seven heard a shrill call rise up from the wood.

Eva was just drifting off, so she could not have corroborated his witness to it—but he was sure it was Faye.

He could sense her there, in the marrow of his bones.

He could read her mind in sudden epiphanic flashes.

He sat upright in bed, heart hammering so hard it must have been leaving imprints on his ribs.

He swallowed dryly, clicking audibly—Adam's apple bobbing between the beats of his aching temples.

Every part of his body reeled in remembrance of Faye.

For years, she had mercilessly tortured him, by some stretches as an evil wraith--and others as a seductive siren goddess.

His fate was torn, between letting go—or letting her go—yet he was too much in love to

truly know it was wrong—or to clearly see her deceit.

So he had harbored dread and longing for her, in the deepest locked chests of his inner belongings. Despite his concern for his own well-being, he was prone to obeying a carnal lust for her, under a dutiful and earnest commitment.

But the petals of mortal rapture only fan out so wide--while the passions of the undead are infinite. So, since Seven's days were categorically numbered anyway, loving Faye was like leaving her forever—and their blossoming romance was really only heaven's death-toll.

He could not ever avert his destiny for the grave—while her spirit was condemned to stalk French's Forest into the rabbit-hole of eternity.

So he was fated to leave her in the land of the living—widowed and alone again—and he would have spared them both the trouble of it, if he could have somehow just resisted her. But his carnal crush on that witch of the creek was too strong--or he was too weak. Either way, it was never fated to end well.

Seven inevitably ended up succumbing to the subconscious knee-jerk reflex that befalls so many heavens-crossed crushes: he gave her every opportunity to reject him, to test her—sabotaging himself by acting jealous.

But she also tested him right back, always ogling the other boys who sometimes played in the nearby fields of Peckham Farms.

So the two of them were each as much monster as saint. In many ways, they were a pair destined to be together—but for many of the same reasons, however, they were each that much worse off for it.

Either way, after knowing the other, their worlds were for sure forever altered.

He would long for her, even when she was just a breath on the ether—exorcised from tangible form to the lost world. Yet, he would also dread her reappearance, thinking of her fondly, yet fearfully—intimately, yet reservedly—and often, yet too much.

He was still desperate for her, but at the same time, he feared her so deeply that he sometimes thought he would crack from the spirit-wracking horror-pangs.

She took him for granted right up until the moment he moved away from French's Forest—and then he was her gravest mistake.

He thought of her often, but when the time came, he couldn't bear to behold her visage again. He couldn't bear to go back to that dark place where their love had flown.

Their hearts were now inextricably

entangled—and yet they could no longer be together, for they had already proven their lives were divergent.

But also, as well, there was Eva to think about. He didn't want her to be jealous of Faye--anymore than he wanted Faye to resent Eva.

He wiped his brow on the wide lip of the bed-sheet and sighed heavily. Electric anxiety fed his system on a chronic streak. His mounting tension quickly suspended all of his hope for sleep.

He stepped over onto an adjoining alcove, to a night-table and rocking chair, where he lit a smoke--wholly unsatisfied with the sudden shaky promise of unconsciousness.

Besides which, he figured that, if he stayed in bed any longer, and tossed about too much—he risked disrupting Eva, right in the heart of her beauty sleep.

Under certain circumstances Eva's wrath challenged Faye's.

Sometimes, however, he just had to be a night-hawk—while other days he was the bird up before breakfast. Some months, he was a zombie for the Z's—and other seasons, he went wink-less for weeks without reprieve.

In short, he couldn't possibly ever keep in sync with Eva's system forever. There would be

days, he knew full well, where Faye would rise again.

But more recently he had begun picking up cycling--which was improving his sleep. He was finding out that the city had better bike paths than the country.

French's Forest, for instance, was more of a hiker's haven—than a cyclist's paradise.

So, the biking was making him eat less, and he was shedding his gut—while getting into spin again with the sun and stars.

In turn, in parallel--Faye was becoming like a distant idea.

He stalked about in the darkness, silent as a panther, plotting his counter-measures in the event of every possible encounter with Faye.

He checked his pocket watch.

He was surprised to find it was 11:11 pm.

He would have guess it were much later—or even earlier the next day. But he guessed it made sense--and he forgot about it again.

He rested in the rocker another spell--and then checked his watch again.

Suddenly, it was 3 am, and the birds were getting restless in their feather-weight nests.

He lit another smoke, contemplating the slippery nature of time, when between ember-blossom drags of smoke and his dancing irises, he

slipper-slapped figure-eights onto the heirloom bear-skin carpet at his feet.

The skin had been in the family since the dark ages, when the Bane boys were all vampire knights—and the girls were all sorceresses.

He had danced on the skin many times throughout the years. He felt it brought him good luck.

His contemplation of the situation grew deeper. He figured, if Faye confronted him now, he would just tell Eva the truth.

He would admit that he had once loved Faye, but that he now loved Eva more.

He would concede that he had been deceitful to both of them, but that he now felt much better, having it all out of his heart and system.

Relief flooded his spirit. He felt half-human again, and found some small measure of forgiveness for himself at last.

If Eva couldn't handle it, and she didn't want him back—then he figured, she just wasn't meant for him.

He would just return to New London, without anyone on his arm—and live happily ever afterward alone.

Suddenly, the pressure to come clean vanished. All his worry over hurt feelings faded.

He finally saw the sense in setting himself up with happiness again.

But math never does love justice, and one-plus-one often equals three in romance--so emotional engagements are often mis-estimated, garnering some of the most potent disappointments.

So he knew he had to be careful about honestly identifying how much he loved Faye, and how much was just fantasy. Plus, he knew he had to be truthful with himself about what role Eva played in his heart, while still sating his own feral longings.

Otherwise, he would put all of their hearts in jeopardy.

His thoughts finally trailed off into peaceful stillness as his subconscious contemplated the countless twinkling stars that fanned out before him in the bay window.

He started to feel tired again, but before succumbing to a star-swollen slumber, he lit up and noticed that it had finally stopped snowing.

Wrapped in a sparkling white gown, French's Forest seemed uncommonly serene—and eternally familiar.

The leafless sylvan crown of the black fall boughs made a bed of thorns for heaven's angels to sit upon—skewering the sky with so many dark

and crooked limbs.

They clawed up at the cosmic lights like a mob of fanatic worshipers beneath the altar of a sentient canopy.

The glittering, fleeting membrane of the universe expanded across the big sky before him—never so bright since the big bang itself.

The majestic mantle glimmered in sandstone and ruby waves, seemingly communicating to him in some kind of alien morse code, of which he was wholly unfamiliar.

The heavens spoke in patterns so deep they were beyond terran—and past supernatural.

Seven felt more in tune with space, time—and the way of life than ever before.

An old country legend came back to him then:

It was sometimes said, that when in French's Forest at night, if one went up to the Hawk Lookout, and sat very quiet--one might catch a glimpse of their own oneness, but you would not carry that vision on for very long, before it dematerialized into limbo—and then once again into that old numb rub of the everyday life.

According to the legend: When one enters into oneness, then one witnesses a siren on the rock in the stream. She calls out, seducing her

prey into the deadly eddies.

You fall for her, like a love-spell's hook and line were cast—and nothing, not even your own mortality, will deter your resolve to be with her that day.

But then she will vanish, and you will wake up naked in the current, skinned of your worldly possessions—absent in memory of the event.

The next day, however, you will return to the stream for more, and she will be there again, to rob you of your entire memory of the evening.

Eventually, if you let her, she will rob you of your life.

People called her Faye, after a teen girl who had committed suicide off Pearl Beach Falls sixty-seven years earlier—after her boyfriend had broken their bond of monogamy. Her ghost had come back to haunt the wood--and to prey on mortal boys.

But French's Forest was full of strange life from beyond the earthly edges. It was normal to have encounters with spirits and oneness there, whether while canoing beneath Pebble Beach Falls-or meditating upon a lookout at Hawk Point.

From gnarled trunk to dancing ravine wild—from wish-granting frog, to sagacious aging mages--the trails of French's Forest were teeming with the beautiful and the obscene.

Every walk of magic and mystery existed under the blue leaves of the wild wood.

It was dangerous—and yet magnificent in the morning, when the sun was up on the peaceful leafy paths—and everybody was in a cheery mood.

It was horrific—and yet, at times, inspiring in its sylvan simplicity.

He found humble jaunts in the mystic land just as mesmerizing as grand enlightenments on Mount Hope under celestial clouds.

He was just as apt to hike through unexplored brush, looking for monsters underground--as to climb up majestic peaks, looking for universal peeks into parallel planes.

He was full of a youth spent on the run and hunt—but he also found just meditating against a tree engaging. Just sitting still, listening to the wind-song of the wood was enough to send his spirit soaring on any devil-dealt morning.

Sometimes he would get so caught up in the swirling maelstrom of supernatural energies, in fact—that it would overload his senses.

Hot-spring eddies from the ether would surge up and down his spine—realigning his chakras, and sending his mind flying.

All in all, French's Forest was an unending adventure to him, which on some levels, he missed terribly, now that he lived in New London.

It was where he had enjoyed playing out all of his favorite childhood fantasies--to no normal end—under no usual hammer of curfew or creative crutch—where Faye was just another facet of a deeply fecund fantasy.

So the Fable of Lady Faye was less of a forest legend to him, than a clue to his next awe-striking escapade. He didn't even care if she was a little bit dangerous, for at least he wouldn't be bored with her.

Indeed, he never found her strange for her immaterial nature—but rather, odd for it—and somewhat intriguing for it.

He lit another smoke with his dying one—being easily given at early hours to the temptation to stew and think.

One memory came back to him just then, of catching a blue darner near Lake Heron, with a dark net in the shade.

A feeling of innocence showered over him. He wished he could go back to that sharp young twig again. He wanted to remember it all better now.

He wanted to live it all again.

He knew, of course, that it was too late for all of that. Plus, French's Forest was not just all peace and leaves—but it was equally often like a nightmare ripped from a Poe dream.

Between the slanted trees, nightmarish wights wept and wailed, for he had spent many a night hunting them down.

Indeed, the more tuned in he became, to the ghost's frequencies, as they rolled along past him, through their tubular spirals, from distance to distance, between the trees—the more careful he became, for he knew full well, every-time he ventured forth into their wood, he risked his very life.

So, over time, he stayed aloof from the supernatural as much as possible--but still, some evenings, he just had to get out.

He was careful to be as safe as possible—but on occasion, he still loved to chase the frights about, tracking over endless fields of ankle-cobbling stone, and down through reedy swamp-streams to where the ethereal beasts hid.

He trained his ears to listen for their spirits. Their melodies played tunes on parallel planes at every angle, and whether to this tangent or to that one that they clung—he listened long enough to find them, to break their language—and to reveal their presence.

It was a partly harmless, partly deadly game to play—and he did it all with the blind courage and careful inquiry that a young boy of good wood-sense can muster.

In those days, he was just some dumb kid facing down the demons of the night, with eyes open wide and full and brave. He just wanted justice for the wood—and he would give his life to see it done.

In hindsight, it surprised him he survived any of it at all.

At first, it was all as simple as a kid entertaining his inner anarchist, playing out the battle fantasies and love vagaries to which young cubs naturally pander. But after awhile, it began to become dangerous.

He could be found on any old night clambering through the thickest thickets and thorniest side-trails of French's Forest—hunting some new monster or poltergeist.

He was a Master Archer, Equestrian—and Hawker.

His knowledge of the flora and fauna of French's Forest was encyclopedic.

His knack for outdoor survival fit the hardiest forester to a tee.

In time, as well, he started to see that most wood nymphs and spirits were at essence just lost souls—entirely better off left alone.

But nevertheless, he found them intriguing--and he ended up spending a number of years in outdoor study. But eventually, he let it

peter out—until he felt a more reasonable share of his former hermit self returning.

More generally, he found he passed through phases, vacillating between being an eager forest ranger—to being an equally staunch proponent of living as a sedentary defender of the homestead.

More toward the end of his adolescence, however, he found that he more commonly wanted to stay in to keep his journal current in case one day became his last.

Then, long after his adventurous days had dwindled, he chronicled his haunted stories of channeling and paranormal eye-witness accounts in his creative writing courses at Western. His professors all thought they were great fables—if a little too far-fetched.

He even won the Lorne Davis Award for creative writing in Horror Fiction at his graduation ceremony.

The stories, naturally, were all about a young ghost hunter who live in a wood called French's Forest.

Looking back, it was all a natural progression, laying the foundation for his eventual career as a horror novelist.

He knew first-hand what strangeness lurked below, just beyond the dark veil--and he was lent

to a natural taste for scaring his readers. Of course, the beauty of his mixed position, was that he only ever had to tell the truth about what really happened.

A few times over the years, in fact, he had actually tried to tell people it was all real, but no one ever believed him anyway.

So, for the most part, he never offered any back-story to his novels—and people just assumed that he was an *auteur* of horror fiction.

He thought of himself as an aspiring journalist--and a non-fiction writer with integrity.

He sought to tell the truth, not the stereotype of the ghost cursed to roam the earth.

He wanted to know their real human stories, despite how frightening or twisted they may seem next to the normal--and the everyday.

He was not afraid of them; he understood them. They were outcasts like he was as a child--and they helped him to understand how a soul could truly be happy to be alone.

Indeed, his folks spent many midnights calling out to him to come home, for it was well past his bed-time—but he would be long off the trodden shoulder, beyond even a vampire's hearing range--deep in the foliage of French's Forest's outer limits.

Looking back on those days now, however,

he realized that he had often felt oppressed by them--and so he had sought blood ties in the pitch of the wood, with the wind and the frogs.

He was the black sheep in his family. They were innately different than him, in every way except their tie as vampires.

He was more at peace with the owl and loon, than with his own flesh and bone. He imagination ran wild on nature's whim. He found solace in the undiscovered elements of rock and water--where his family only ever saw the old river and the crumbling stone.

Although never as feral or primal as the raven or fox that played alongside him, in his time in French's Forest, he honed his ranging instincts.

He found peace and tranquility in the swamps where his family never traveled. He was more relaxed far away from home, on some adventure in the forest—instead of cooped up at home with Olin.

He didn't want his family to worry about him, but if they enforced their curfews—he felt hell-bound to stew and burn.

But at the tipping point, at the turn of seventeen, he awoke with a strength of interconnectedness more intense than anything else he had ever felt before.

In his own mystical way, he began to

express himself, but slowly--yet with steady growth and due care.

It was more than a second sight or a sixth sense. It was a seventh level, parallel in nature to other planes, yet still coming from its own angle.

It was an innate knowledge of dragonfly wings flapping across the continent; it was a kinetic sensitivity to the oldest roots of French's Forest, deep below, growing relentlessly, doggedly--downward.

For the first time in his life, he didn't feel alone—and ever-afterward, he knew he was a true and legitimate link in the basic chain-mail membrane of the multi-verse.

When he heard the birds chirping in the skies, he could now ascertain their mood and motive; when he saw the fawn fleeing, he knew the rascal cougar was at it again.

When at the dinner table with his folks, they would complain about the weather--he would predict its course.

Then, one rainy night of infamy, under enchanted moonlight, at his eighteenth birthday, while tracking past one of Pearl Beach's babbling brooks, he ran upon a red butterfly that transformed itself into the shimmering silver figure of a siren, with eyes like two burning suns—and a wild shock of red dreadlocks.

She began bathing in a rainbow-bed of water—and the boughs around her bowed to her beauty. She sang as if a heavenly choir were behind her.

His breath shortened.

Her spirit fell upon him in a lush golden light.

It was a mellifluous intoxicant.

Her curves curled his lips.

Her liquid frame of dynamism rippled at his presence.

With one small hand, she beckoned him over.

Her mouth fell agape—where a galaxy came spiraling outward.

He blinked—she closed her mouth--and the destructive vortex vanished again.

The auric seductress remained, however, irresistibly alluring.

“Come to me, pet,” she spoke telepathically, lips sealed in a wicked grin.

He stalked toward her, stomping heavily through the clearing, a bipedal automaton fully entranced.

The sticks and dried long-grass crunched under his heavy heels as he crossed the untrodden route.

The ground suddenly fell away. He

was lighter than air, and rising toward her.

She pulled him in, as if by some invisible tether, and he floated uncontrollably toward her waiting black claws.

When he came within mere feet of her, she turned grotesque again.

Long wicked fangs ran out from her mouth.

Sharp crooked horns spiraled up from her temples.

Her skin quaked and cracked into black scales.

“Call me Lady Faye, pitiful mortal creature,” she said aloud, each word punctuated by the vision of galaxies in her mouth. “I am from the planes of Animalia, high above this level, and far beyond your soft brain's comprehension,” she said, her voice beginning to bristle with bass and boom. But you, nevertheless, sense in your heart that I am not of this world.”

He nodded, feeling an immutable truth being uttered.

“This world is of me,” she said.

Her long black tongue unraveled over her fangs, lashing about, spitting black oil onto the stream.

She raised one hand. “*AI-EEE-YAAA-a-a-a-x!!!!*” she wailed. Her pet Anaconda struck up from the depths, wrapping about Seven's body,

dragging him helplessly back down underwater.

At first Seven struggled, but the snake was too strong. The light vanished as they descended for what seemed fathoms, when he knew for a fact this part of the Payne was never more than a few yards deep.

Then, just when Seven could feel the last of his breath run out of his lungs, he heard her in his mind say: *"Bring him to me alive ..."*

So Ax dragged him back above water, and flung him upon a stony bank, leaving Seven gasping for life.

Once more, Faye opened her mouth--and the black vortexes re-formed.

Her eyes rolled back into her head.

"When you pass through the mouth of creation, child," she cackled. "You will learn what it means to change—and to never go back ... Once you witness the sublime edge of everything, you will never forget it. Welcome to the far side of the world, my darling, weakling, human ... boy."

He tried to resist the force pulling him forward, but the more he struggled, the quicker he approached the event horizon of her gaping black maw.

"And you will live with me," she telepathed. "In French's Forest, for eternity ...!!! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha ... !!! A rat at

my disposal ... You will obey me before your very own family! Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha ...”

Seven felt his body elongating as he was being sucked into her inward chaos of counter-creation.

“Say good-bye to yourself forever, Seven!” she cried in his mind.

“Nooo!!!” he screamed, soul bubbling, brain hemorrhaging--body stretching itself to infinity's end. “I'm not ready!” he yelled, anger raging in him.

A splash in the river-bed behind them startled the demoness, causing her concentration to skip.

So then Seven fell from her control, landing into a broken heap upon a bed of jagged rocks, under foam where the river stepped down.

Red rivulets ran away on the water from his temples. In his fleeting consciousness, he saw a panther emerging from the shadows of the wood.

It waded through the rapids toward Faye--cautious, yet steely-eyed in its hunt.

The next thing Seven ever remembered was waking up in his boyhood bed the next morning—with the smell of breakfast moistening his tongue.

His head hurt, but otherwise he felt fine. He tried to remember further what had happened,

but it was a wasted, useless effort.

The veil had already again fallen.

Godwin explained to him afterward, that they had found him sleep-walking in the brook, with a gash on his forehead, and the roman numeral seven carved into his arm, as if by a small knife or nail—when they carried him home.

From then on, Seven ventured into French's Forest less often—on moments of higher rarity, when the need for adventure surmounted the desire to live another day.

But, living in French's Forest, however reclusive he became, he still seemed to encounter Faye on a regular basis.

She always revealed herself in her pretty skin at first, in order to bait him in. But then, she would revert to her truer form, and bring him within an inch of his death—when the panther would reappear to scare her off again.

It only ever arrived at a distance—but it always made enough of a show to make sure its serious stake in the matter of Seven's fate was well understood by Faye.

Invariably, Seven didn't see the panther emerge until he himself was fading fast from the waking world—lying in the Payne broken, bruised and bloody—or on French's Forest floor, eyes rolling back into his head. (His family simply

learned never to ask him where he got his gashes from—lest they sparked his ire.)

Seven would always awaken again to find a freshly cut number seven somewhere on his body. She always cut him in some new language or number system that she hadn't used before.

He eventually named the panther Ella, after his dead grandmother—who he believed had returned to protect him. The Bane family crest depicted a panther and a bat astride a jagged red shield—so it only seemed natural to Seven that a dead family member might come back as one of their kin-emblem night beasts, to send a sign that he or she was really there.

He remembered then how Marietta had told him once that his middle name Allen was after his grandmother Ella—and that at times he looked exactly like her.

It also occurred to him as oddly coincidental that as a four-year old boy living by Lake Heron, he often had vivid dreams of being a panther, stalking down inland jungle ghosts.

Then, on other strange days in French's Forest, a murder of fifty human-faced crows would appear, flapping down from the grey skies.

He recalled how one time, he and Faye were facing off on the infamous Mound of the Moribund, when the fifty ugly crows appeared out

of thin air--and suddenly descended upon the both of them.

He remembered how he was just about to draw his arrow—and Faye was just about to unleash her web of lightning from her fingernails—when the crows fell upon their heads, and confused the melee.

Their claws got into their hair--and tore at their garments.

Totally distracted, Seven loosed his arrow in a harmless arc across the far field—and Faye's lightning merely shot back up at the sky.

Blood and hair splattered the field, as adrenaline surged—and Faye and him thrashed about, to be rid of the winged nuisances.

Faye's silver gown was torn from seam to far seam. Her red locks were left torn from root—or frayed to their razor-tips.

Seven's clothes were loosed of their collars and hems and pockets—and ripped right off of his back—leaving him in a rage—in shredded rags over under-garments.

Eventually, Faye grew so angry that a storm broke in, and the birds scattered.

Then after Faye and him recollected themselves, they found themselves encircled by the birds, a few yards off—in an unbroken line of the murder.

They were sentries from the skies, locked wing-in-wing—with fifty human faces, from young to old—lending them a grotesque unnaturalness that tingled the spine.

Then, one of the birds took to flight, landing within ear-shot of them—equidistant from them. This one had red wigs.

It spoke: *“Leave the boy alone, Eva ... or we'll seal off French's Forest forever!”*

“Never!” Faye said. *“He is mine, and no one can stop me. Do not fool yourself, Evan ... I am more powerful than you when I'm down, than you ever were—even when you were alive.”*

“Then you leave us no choice, Eva, but to try to convince your mother to paint over us.”

“Damn you, Seven,” Faye cursed. *“Your stubborn streak has gone and spoiled my game ... Now I'm really going to make you pay.”*

“But ... what did I do?” he began defending himself—confused about what he had done.

Faye evaporated into the fog, and the birds departed the scene—leaving Seven alone again, until next time.

So, his encounters with Faye were regular--and always alarming—but nevertheless, he managed to escape them mostly unscathed—or at least, still alive and vital.

Eventually, one day, however, he decided to make a stand against Faye--or else risk letting her rule him forever.

Determined to live like a human for once, without always having to check for Lady Faye lurking behind every trunk and rock—he set out from French's Forest, New London-bound, ready to start anew in the big city.

So far, he had been lucky. The plan had begun to work, as Faye was slowly removed from his thoughts by her absence--and he began to find harmony in balance again.

Whenever he brought a new woman home, however, to visit his family, he sensed Faye's jealous presence rising in his veins.

She was a phenomenon of an intense carnal emotion, but her spite spoke of a human bitterness like he had never known before—and like he had never wanted to know so intimately ever again.

He remembered then how Faye had once lashed out at his ex Grace, with a whip of lightning that had lacerated Grace's abdomen in jagged snaps—leaving her bleeding in halves upon a bed of morning leaves.

Faye had ended up burning Grove Gardens down to dirt that day. Only charred rock and smoking stump had remained.

Another time, when he was in the shower,

his ex Abby had come into the bathroom and started disrobing.

She thought she was undetected, but he could see her silhouette through the curtain.

Then, just as she was about to draw back the rings, in the steam before his eyes, Faye's sinewy silver lines materialized.

Seven swallowed hard, cut short of time to do anything about the impending discovery.

Abby drew back the curtain, and her jaw dropped in shock of the red-haired woman in the shower with him.

“How could you?” she cried, voice curdling in hurt.

She turned and marched out, slamming the door so hard it bounced back ajar.

Seven followed her out in only a towel, dripping like a seal—and blushing guilty as a fool caught red-handed.

He told her he could explain everything--and that the other woman was just a figment of the imagination.

But no matter what he said, he only seemed to speed up Eva's flight.

So she vanished in as much smoke and light as she had arrived, once more leaving him feeling equally lucky and cursed in life and love.

He never saw her again—and he wondered

if he would ever find someone to call his own.

So Faye had learned how to sabotage his relationship with precision.

She always donned her angelic body for his girlfriends, taking every opportunity to flash flesh, in her fancy for him.

Her other favorite game, of course, was to lure him into bed—and just when she had him under the covers, she would re-reveal her darker, goblin-inspired mug.

He had fallen for it many times--and he was always left traumatized by her sudden turn of face, mid-throe of passion and paradise.

Her spell on him never held long enough, however, to complete his total entrapment. He always seemed to break free from her charms at the very last possible moment.

Eventually, when his parents passed on, he planned to sell the old house--and be done with the haunting at last. But for now, whenever he visited home, he and all of his family remained vigilant against Faye's games.

He mashed out his smoke and rolled back into bed. He dreamed he and Eva were angels skipping along the backs of iridescent clouds--skating figure-eights around the rings of the sun.

“How long have we been here, Seven?”

“I don’t know, babe. Seems like forever,

though.”

“Are we dreaming?”

“Does it matter?”

“Pinch me ...”

“No you pinch me.”

“Okay, let's pinch each other at the same time ...”

“Alright, on the count of three ...”

“One, two--”

“Three ... GO!”

They pinched each other.

The clouds beneath them parted.

Their eyes went wild.

They started screaming as they fell,
plummeting toward the blue earth far below.

They grasped for each other in their free-falls—releasing every mortal care, bound only in their mutual love.

They embraced each other with every fiber in the rip and roar of their downward spirals.

They were a moribund set of spirits-elect--hell-bent on the after-world--kissing madly as one for the last time.

iii Siren From The Stream Of The Subconscious

Seven awakened gasping, skin glistening.
He snuck off mouse-soft to the bathroom, where
he started the shower.

What had he done? he scolded himself.
Eva was not safe here.

He'd brought his girlfriend into the wood of
the witch, without even disclaiming the risk to her.

He hadn't even told her yet that he was a
vampire--although after the previous night, he
figured that she must be on to something.

Beside that, his natural father being a
convict from down under, he was technically only
half-vampire.

*His heart paused. What had he been
thinking?* he wondered.

*Was it something subconscious? Was Faye
tricking him into returning to French's Forest, for
her own evil ends?*

*Did she already know everything he was
thinking, even before he thought it?*

Was he himself even safe to be around?

He knew from experience that the aura of
French's Forest brought out the bloodthirsty animal

in him—and that it would steadily grow more difficult to restrain himself, the longer that he remained near the wood.

But what if he just rolled over in his sleep one night--and his fang happened to find Eva's neck? he wondered randomly.

He imagined waking up next to her motionless body—and how it would feel to find the dried blood on his chest and realize he was the killer.

He shut the shower off, dried, dressed--and squeaked about the hard-wood floor, checking on the others to see if everyone was still asleep.

He almost knocked Olin's guitar over, but deftly caught it before it could crash against the glass coffee table.

He froze, waiting for someone to wake. From the bedrooms, he heard only some small snoring--and some tossing about.

He crept into the kitchen and opened the sliding door.

Fresh air rolled in, clearing his head. He stared outside into the breaking night for a good length of time, airing out the household--and breathing in the approaching morning.

After awhile, however, he began to grow uncomfortable with the incarnate presence of French's Forest, and he shut the door again.

But, pausing--he heard Faye's voice in his head: *'Come on now, boy ... Come back to me ... Show me your Lucky Hands, Seven ... Show me your Lucky Hands!!!'*

He stepped out into the night.

The presence was still there, but there was something else.

He listened more carefully, and beyond the strident cricket-song and ominous owl hoots, over the trickling brook, he heard her eerily familiar heartbeat.

He could sense her jealousy raging like an ocean storm across the back of his mind.

He turned toward the house, and his heels picked up the pace beneath him. He slipped quickly inside and quietly shut himself in--sliding the bolt-lock across.

Then, while turning back toward the kitchen, he bumped into Eva.

"Yah! Whoa, geeez ... Eva ..." he said, relieved—yet suddenly steeped in sputtering jitters. "Sorry, I didn't see you there ..."

"I was here the whole time ... Just *watching* you ..." she said.

"Don't freak me out like that ..."

"I'm sorry," she said. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yes ..." he said, subconsciously glancing

toward the back-door.

“Did you see something out there?”

“No ... nothing at all ... It's just ... chilly out ...”

“Oh,” she said, giving him a hurt, quizzical look--before returning to her simpler charm and brightness. “Well, did you sleep alright?”

He shook his head. “Not really ... Just thinking too much, plus the nightmares and all ...”

“Oh babe, I'm sorry,” she said. “Just remember, though—at least *you* can remember your dreams.”

He laughed. “Sometimes I envy you, never remembering anything.”

She shrugged cutely--and then handed over a small gift-wrapped box. “Don't worry, it's nothing big.”

“Oh babe ... I didn't get you anything ... I thought we agreed ...??”

“Hey, don't worry, this one doesn't count,” she said. “You know how you're always late for everything, right? Because you hate wearing watches, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Well,” she said--and pointed at the present.

He stuck a finger in one loose fold and tore it open. He pulled out a red felt box--and carefully

lifted the lid.

A glimmering pocket-watch lay nestled inside. His jaw muscles quivered like fly-wings.

He dangled the watch by its gold chain, letting it swing back-and-forth like a pendulum, reflecting clear as dawn in the backs of his possessive little eyes.

“I know how you hate jewelry, especially anything silver—but when I saw this gold chain, I just knew it would look good, hanging from your pocket.”

“No, I love it. You are so thoughtful and sweet. I love you.”

Tears beaded at the corner pockets of his eyes.

“Now you have no excuse not to know the time ...”

“No excuse ...” he said and smiled. *How could he ever tell her the truth?* he secretly wondered in guilt.

He was sure, that someday soon, he would lose her forever.

“It's engraved too ...” she said.

She flipped it over for him.

It read: *Seven's Lucky Hands.*

His eyes brimmed with tears. “I love you more than myself.”

“Thank you,” she said and smiled.

“Now you're supposed to say you love me too ...” he said.

They laughed together.

“I know, I *do-oh* ... more than you'll ever know,” she said, wiping his tears away.

Thunder broke outside, shaking the walls.

“That was quick ...” she said. “It looked nice out just a minute ago--from the bathroom window ...”

“French's Forest storms blow in so fast, some nights you think the whole house is going to lift off and float away.”

He paused and sighed. “Eva, I'm sorry I brought you here.”

“Why?”

“It's not safe.”

Her face fell. “What's going on? I want to know everything. No secrets, babe—remember?”

A branch broke at a stirring proximity outside.

They cast their gazes toward the door.

Lightning flashed and they waited for the boom to follow.

Thunder rolled out moments later, and they knew they were in the heart of the system.

Eva ran into the drawing room, to look out of the picture window—and Seven followed her close behind.

Ashen clouds blotted out the dawn sun—reverting the day to night.

The house lights fell short on the long, dark lawn.

“Oh my god, did you see that?” she hissed.

“Where,” he began, but then he saw it too.

In a flash of lightning, just beyond the wood fringe, in the shadow-depths, Faye and Ax swam between the trees, as if the very forest air were their river.

Ax took the low current, sliding along on the quicksilver wind—as Faye hovered a stretch above him, gliding between the sharp, grasping limbs of the wood.

“What is it?” Eva said, eyes glistening from fear.

The thunder shook the roof and they waited for the flash again.

Faye and Ax were now half-the-distance to them--and closing in.

Her hollow eyes were locked on their trembling gazes.

“It's her,” Seven said shortly. “She's coming for us.”

“*Faye?*!” Eva hissed again.

“Shhh! Don't ...”

But it was too late, Faye was almost upon them.

White fire radiated from her eyes, flooding everywhere with a brilliant light.

Infinity illuminated the fields, swallowing up every last shred and tendril of darkness.

Seven and Eva were instantly blinded.

"I can't see, Seven—oh my god, oh my god I can't see ... Seven?" Eva tried to say, but she heard no sound—and felt uncontrollably lost in the white light.

Even the sound waves had been washed out by the light.

Then she felt arms closing around her.

Seven pulled her tight. *"It'll be alright ..."* he tried to say to her, but nothing came out.

They tumbled about together in the noiseless sea of bright nothingness.

Then suddenly—finally--the shine died again—and their vision and hearing gradually returned.

Faye stood with Ax curling about her calves—only yards yonder.

"Seven ... What's going on?"

"Everything's going to be fine," he said. "But you gotta trust me, that we have to leave--now ... We're not welcome here anymore."

He ushered her back toward the stairs, then dashed over to the door to ensure it was locked.

Pulling aside the tiny curtain, he saw Faye

striding up toward the stoop.

"Is she still there?" Eva asked.

"Is who still there?" Marietta said from the kitchen. She had her hands deep in sink-water, looking at them over her shoulder.

"Mother, why are you up?" Seven said.

"Why is everybody getting up?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear ... I was only going to make us all breakfast, you see," Marietta said.

"Now what in French's Forest is going on?"

A tremendous humming arose outside, as if a great river of crackling electric current was rushing the house.

Every window blushed with Faye's living light. The songbirds warbled their dismay, tremulously in the trees.

Marietta shrieked. "God oh god ... Oh god ... *It's HER again ...*"

"Calm down now, we can handle this," Seven said. "Just clear your mind of her. Don't think her name, don't picture her ... She preys on attention—and she can smell your thoughts."

Godwin and Olin came stumbling down the stairs, scratching their heads and rubbing their eyes.

"What's with the early-birds?" Godwin said, yawning. "Boy that sun's bright out, eh?"

"This better be worth it," Olin whined."

The kitchen door started to rattle, as if the wind would smash it open at any second—and there could no longer be any mistaking it, by any of them, that Faye was now in the house.

The humming elevated to a nearly deafening pitch.

They futilely covered their ears up as their drums popped one-by-one.

“What does she want” Eva cried.

“Nothing! I swear!”

Eva resorted to lip-reading—and sensed the gist of it was that he was covering something up.

It was almost like lies were see-through in the absence of a voice.

“There's got to be a reason, you must have led her on ...”

“*She means nothing to me!*” Seven screamed. “*I swear on my grave!*”

“Please you two,” Godwin pleaded. “There is no time for this. You've got to go ... Faye's not after us. She's only after you.”

“She's just after the girl,” Olin put in.

Then, suddenly, Olin's eyes rolled back into his head—and he began marching toward the light.

“Olin!” Godwin called out. “What in the blazes do you think that you're doing?”

“He's mesmerized,” Seven barked. “We're losing him.”

Eva started after him, but she tripped—and ended up shoving Olin further on toward the vortex.

“Eva!” Seven yelled. He pulled her back.

At the last second, Godwin grabbed Olin—and dragged him away.

“We have to get up on the roof,” Seven said. “Up above the trees, where her powers can’t reach us.”

The house crested French's Forest at its very peak, where an iron weather-vane gargoyle crouched, catching the four winds with his wings. Seven often found respite up there, from the Bane family life. It felt calmer out where the grip of the woodland's mystical field first broke and weakened.

He had spent a lot of his early years in retreat from the world, up on top of the house with the gargoyle and his pen and journal.

Up there, it was just him and the weather-vane—and the horizon.

Up there, he could write for as long as he liked--weather permitting, of course—and he did not have to worry about Faye finding him.

At least, he had never encountered her up there.

He figured, at that altitude it was harder for her to bend her mind to his height.

“It's our only chance,” he said.

Together, the five of them mounted the steps. When they reached the first landing, Eva spun Seven about and faced him square on.

Tears were streaming down her cheeks.

“You promised me you weren't hiding anything,” she hissed. “We had a deal,” she said and shoved him.

Olin stepped in between them. “Okay, you two, there's no time for this now. You can have it out later.”

“All pertinent history on the table,” Eva said. “What happened to that, Seven? I thought 'honesty was our best policy' ...”

“I know, I know,” Seven said.

A tsunami of humming light was now rolling up the stairwell. Olin looked back and waved Godwin and Marietta on. “We're right behind you!” he called out.

Godwin nodded and led Marietta away.

For once, Seven was at a loss for what to say. “Ok, Eva ... C'mon, we gotta keep moving,” he said, lightly touching her elbow.

She pulled away, glaring at him.

Olin backed off from them both, stepping toward the next level. “Let's go, both of you, don't be stupid,” he urged them on—fanning his hands at them, waving them up the stairs after him.

Eva wiped her tears, sobs breaking into laughter. “What an idiot I've been, thinking somehow you were different from all the rest.”

“But *I am different* Eva ... I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“No, you're not, you're just another cheating, lying bastard. I've been watching you all along, Seven. You don't think I heard you moaning someone else's name in your sleep? You don't think I saw the look in your eyes when Olin said her name last night? God damn you, Seven. *God ... damn you.*”

Faye's electric white essence was now swirling around their ankles, licking greedily in snapping whips of lightning at their knees.

Eva's breathing became troubled. Her face contorted in a series of increasingly horrified expressions—until tears started cascading from her eyes.

She began to back away from him--down the stairs.

“Eva, please ... What the hell are you doing?” he pleaded.

“I feel like ... I don't even know who you are anymore, Seven,” she said, sobbing.

She waded into the electric pool up to her waist, then hesitated.

She cast her gaze into the vein of Faye's

maelstrom, and she appeared imbalanced—poised on fainting.

“Do you love her?” she said weakly.

“No, *Eva* ... it's nothing like that, at all ... I *hate* her, in fact ... I hate everything about her ...”

He couldn't see her face wince at his words.

“*What* then? What does she want from you? What did you say to her?”

“I haven't said anything to her, *Eva*, I swear ... It's been years since we were civil ... It's just that she's relentless ... and crazy, *Eva* ... She won't stop until I'm hers again ... *Eva*, I'm so sorry ... I love you *Eva*. I'm so sorry ...”

Ax's silhouette slowly surfaced, rippling up--circling just beneath the electric breaker waves.

She didn't seem to notice at first—yet Seven sensed if he drew her attention to the snake, she would panic—quicken an attack.

“I love you beyond this very world, *Eva* ... Please come with me now,” he said.

“More than her?”

“Yes!!! More than her, more than myself ... I just didn't want to jeopardize *us* by telling you everything right away ... Please, *Eva*, I'm so sorry ... Please come back to me now,” he said, verging on tears, unready to lose her—and about to yell for her to *run for it*--when she

suddenly changed her mind.

She waded up out of the electric sea—back into his embrace.

“Oh, thank god, Eva, thank god ...” he said.

“You're such a coward,” she said, finding a renewed backbone in a subconscious defense of the hurt. “You even lie to yourself, Seven ... just to make your guilt go away,” she whispered in his ear.

He nodded, sore beyond expression.

“What are you afraid of, Seven? Saying sorry? Is that it ...? Are you just afraid of saying sorry?”

“But I *am* saying sorry to you ... *right now*,” he said. “I don't know what else to say, except I'm sorry ...”

“What ...?”

He found himself declaring: “I just don't think it's going to work out for us, Eva. I just don't think I deserve you.”

He shook his head in disgust with himself. It felt as if Faye had made him say it.

“Come on, Eva ... we can't stay here ...” he said more forcefully, trying to shake his trance. He tugged her up the stairs behind him.

“Why don't you deserve me, Seven?” she said, while following along.

“I'm cursed, Eva. I'm irreversibly *cursed*.”

“Damn you, liar,” she said, growling—but still keeping pace with him—equally as mad at him, as afraid of Faye.

The supernatural light rose to consume the house, crackling up the stairs after them—oozing through the floorboards and walls.

They regrouped with Olin, Godwin and Marietta on the third floor—where all of the Bane family heirlooms hung on display along the tall walls. From the family crest, to old scrolls written by long-dead ancestors—to various suits of armor once worn by their elder-knight relations.

Even the swords and spears once used for war were here.

“I hurt my ankle,” Eva whimpered. “You were pulling me too fast.”

“Why won’t she stop?” Marietta said.
“Will she kill us all?”

“I’m so tired of this bitch,” Godwin said.

“Please, no, Godwin,” Marietta cried.

“I’m going to show her how to hunt something down,” he said.

“It’s not worth it,” Marietta begged. “She’ll break off before long, I bet. Don’t abandon us, Godwin.”

But his eyes had become black daggers, and he seemed intent on making a stand.

“Don’t do it, old man,” Olin warned.

“She'll *destroy* you. She's too powerful.”

“Bull! I've forgotten more blood-works than she'll ever see in her little eternity.”

Olin nodded, distantly proud.

Marietta bit Godwin once on the cheek. A thin stream of blood ran down over his chin, and she wiped it clean with her kerchief.

She looked away, tearing up.

Seven shook Godwin's hand—and Eva hugged him once.

“You've got a good one here, boy,” Godwin said. “She's got nerve for a human.”

“Hey!” Eva said, lightly slapping his chest.

Godwin laughed wickedly.

He turned about and forged his fate. He was the patriarch--and he felt it fit his role to go first.

It sent him off with honor.

The others went on, only looking back to see Faye emerging from her mystical mist, without Ax--but with a sword of lightning in one hand—and a shield of blood in the other.

Godwin roared, beating his chest, darts flying from his eyes.

As the madness of the hunt settled into his face—he grinned wildly, relishing the impending melee.

Faye swung for his side, and he caught the

blade with his hand.

It burned through his flesh to his finger bone, where it kept etching its passage.

He swallowed the agony and fired a volley of black blades back at her--from the channel of his open palm.

She blocked them with her blood-shield, which softened the impact—but his attack still blew her into her own void of light again.

He jumped in after her, fangs bared—razor claws unsheathed from their finger-tips.

They never saw him again.

When they reached the fifth level, Seven pulled a chair across--and Olin stood on it to unlatch the skylight.

One-by-one, as Faye grew ever closer, they climbed up onto the steeply slanted mansion roof, that glittered in a sea of lights.

Then, after Marietta had made it up, with the help of Seven and Eva's outstretched arms, Olin was the last to exit--but suddenly, Faye emerged from behind her pulsing, crackling veil.

She stepped forward toward Olin, as he was trying to pull his weight up into the skylight. Her footsteps were heavy on the boards.

She wore a black suit of armor, of thorn and scale. Bone horns spiraled out from her temples—and blood stains ran all the way up to

her shoulders.

Olin grimaced and groaned. His grip on the frame loosened--as fear ensnared his thoughts, sapping the strength from his arms.

His eyes locked on Faye's again, entrapping his mind—keeping him pinned to the spot.

“Olin!” Seven cried, tugging fruitlessly on his arm. Even with Eva and Marietta's help, they could not pull up his stiffened body.

“Olin, snap out of it!” Marietta cried hysterically.

“*Come to me, Olin,*” Faye said smoothly, black tongue flicking out from her head-gear's small mouth-hole.

Olin felt compelled to drop to the floor again.

“Nooo!!!” he cried, struggling against his own mind, giving one last push for control—but it was too late, for he had already grown too weak.

“*Come to me now, Olin ... Come to Lady Faye ...*”

Olin took a step toward her.

“*That's it ... that's right, my boy ... Obey me, Olin ... You know you want to ... Don't you, Olin? Don't you want to?*”

“Yes,” he said, bowing his head. He took another step.

“*That's it ... a little further ... Come to me now, Olin ... OLIN!!! COME TO ME NOW!!!*”

Seven was growing jealous, and it fueled his fire to save his brother.

"I'll meet you at the top," he said to Marietta and Eva.

"What? No!" Eva said. She grabbed him, but he pushed her away—and she didn't resist.

"Let him go!" she cried. "It's too late for him!"

"Don't fall for her trap, Seven," Marietta said.

He sat down in the skylight frame, feet dangling down.

"Please Seven, no!" Eva cried, cupping her mouth.

"You can't be serious," Marietta said.

"Don't leave poor Eva like this," she said.

"Meet you at the top," he said, ignoring her plea.

Eva dropped to her knees at the skylight, visibly broken in heart and spirit.

He nodded once at each of them in turn and then jumped down into the house.

Eva cried out in a sorrowful dismay.

Marietta dragged her back. "It's too late, fawn ... He's gone now ..." she said. "We have to save ourselves now."

Eva shook her head in silent protest, unable to talk under the shock of it all.

"Don't worry, I don't think she's after us,"

Marietta said. "I think she'll leave us alone now."

Eva trembled, staring off into the stormy skies, as the lightning crashed down all across the forest crown.

She was unable any longer to feign confidence or bravery. She just wanted to get as far away from Lady Faye and French's Forest as possible.

Marietta helped her find her feet again, and her balance—and together they scaled the shingles to the gargyle-weather-vane, where they could see to the distant edges of the wood in every direction.

They clung to each other and the weather-vane—and began to pray.

Meanwhile, down below, Seven grabbed Olin and turned him around. "Olin, break out of it," he snapped. "She's *got* you."

"Leave me to her," Olin said flatly. "I know what I'm doing."

"Olin, you're under sorcery!"

"Seven! I know!"

Seven growled.

Faye was circling them on the rim of the whirlpool.

Seven grabbed a sword off of the wall--and Olin grabbed his arm to stop him.

"What do you think you're doing with that,

brother?"

"She must be stopped."

"You'll have to go through me first," Olin said.

"This is my drama, Olin. You don't need to be a part of this. She means nothing to you."

"No ... On the contrary, dear brother ... She means everything to me," Olin said, his eyes lighting up. "I always loved her brother ..." he said. "I just never knew she felt the same ..."

Seven turned toward Faye, raising the sword before him.

She hissed, sensing engagement.

But before they locked offenses, Olin intervened, grabbing Seven from behind in a bear-hug.

Struggling to break free, Seven dropped his sword to the floor.

"I warned you," Olin said.

Faye opened her mouth, and from out of the spiraling vortex, a thousand black locusts ran off of her tongue, spiraling in toward them.

Olin let Seven go.

"Up on the table," Seven said, and hopped up himself, but looking back—he saw his brother would not follow.

"Go on without me, brother. I will stall her."

“You don't know what you're doing, Olin! This is in her plan! She's tricking you!”

Olin crouched down, then opened his arms widespread—inviting Faye in, whether by bug or beauty delivered.

“*Olin!*” Seven said. “Listen to me, I've been where you are right now ... and it's not easy, I know ... but you can't trust her, Olin! She'll reel you in and never let go ...”

“You're just jealous,” Olin said. The locusts were filling in his open mouth now, as they swarmed over his body, catching in his hair and eyes and ears.

Faye laughed maniacally, from the outer rim of the maelstrom.

“Olin!” Seven cried, but his brother was already gone—and the very table he was standing on was about to meet the same fate.

Seven jumped across to the skylight and pulled himself up.

Looking back one last time, he saw that Olin was now entirely encased by locusts, except his eyes, which cast up at him—bloodshot and shaking.

Seven joined Marietta and Eva at the gargoyle weather-vane.

Eva hugged him, overjoyed Marietta's prophecy turned false--and he embraced her back

with earnest.

“I’m so sorry, Eva.”

“No, I’m sorry, Seven. I love you so much.”

“I *only* love you.”

Marietta saw in them what she had once had with Godwin, when they were young lovers—and she grew furious about Faye’s menace.

“How dare she mess with my boy,” she muttered, anger boiling over—ears reddening with rage.

By now, the humming was growing again, and they could feel Faye’s field rising beneath them. It would only be a fraction of time before she had reached her vertical threshold.

The three of them braced for what would unfold.

The waves of sound reached a crescendo pitch again, just below them.

They looked at each other, instinctively surmising it was time to make their last prayers—for these might be their final chances.

White light seeped through the shingles, lapping at the soles of their feet.

“I thought you said she couldn’t reach us up here?” Eva cried.

“I thought so too!”

“She's not going to get away with this, Seven,” Marietta said. “I'm not going to let her.”

“No, Marietta ...” Seven said, sensing the direction of her intention.

“I'm breaking the Old Code, Seven ... No more holding back.”

“No, Marietta! Once you taste blood, you'll never live alongside humans again ... Deer blood will never be good enough, mother!”

“Never mind all that now, son,” Marietta said, a new tone weaving through her voice. “You and Eva jump for the front porch awning, while I hold her back ... Here's the keys to the jeep. Take it past the limits, boy. Don't stop for anything.”

Seven tried to restrain his objection to the idea, but it remained evident in his face.

“Raise a family, Seven ... You'll be a great father someday. Have lots of little half-fangs for me, okay?”

“Okay mother,” he finally said, nodding grimly. He wasn't sure if he would keep the promise, but in the moment, it felt imperative it was made.

Marietta then took her kitchen knife from her apron belt and cut her wrist open.

She sucked her own blood, and began to glow from the supernatural fix of the substance.

Her fangs grew long, and her muscles

bulged.

Her skin turned snow white.

She transformed into a hulking beast of prey, ravenous from the little bite—desperate for a meal.

Seven suddenly grew afraid for Eva. “We better jump for it,” he said.

“I don't think I can,” she cried.

Marietta roared.

The wind turned, bringing the gargoyle about—and Eva's scent to Marietta's attention. “Mmmm,” Marietta said, salivating. “Human girls are so tasty.”

By now, Faye's white essence had risen to their waists, and Seven could feel something grazing his ankle.

“I don't even know where to jump,” Eva gasped.

“Don't worry, I'll jump for us ... Trust me, just take my hand,” he said. “On the count of three ...”

The light was up to their necks now--and they watched Marietta dive under.

“Wait ... What if you're wrong?” Eva cried.

“Is there any other choice?”

But before Seven could convince her to leap, Faye's electric veil rose another few feet,

submerging them.

Faye's banshee cacophony flat-lined into silence--as it out-stripped their range--and once more, they could not see each other, but for the off-white light bending about their angles.

Seven carefully reached out for her, afraid of losing his balance and sliding off the roof.

"*Eva ...*" he tried to say, but he did not hear a sound.

He felt more to the left, where he found her—and she grabbed him back.

Their fingers intertwined.

"*Eva it's me,*" he tried to say, but still no sound followed from his lips.

"*Damn you Faye,*" he cried in silence.

She tightened her little finger.

He squeezed it right back. He removed his old school ring and slid it on her third finger, letting her know their love was still real.

As the ring set into place, its circumference flared with a brilliance of radiant evanescence.

Faye's anger bled from the skies overhead, a network of lightning crackling down on every tip and bough of the wood—from mouth to falls of the River Payne.

Seven took it as their cue to go--and holding Eva's hand, he stepped to the edge of nothingness. He could feel the roof sloping away

from his feet, down into the void.

He swung his arms three times, to let her know when to jump—and then they leaped off together, into the unknown emptiness.

He came to consciousness on the drawing room couch.

A few small lamps were on in the corners, but there was no unnatural force detected.

No humming crept up from the other wall; no malignant entity lurked about in the shadows.

Eva stood leaning against a pillar, gazing out of the picture window.

“Is she gone?” he said wearily.

“I think so,” she said. “I really hope so.”

“What happened? I forget everything after we jumped ...”

“We hit the awning and in the same instant we could see and hear again. We slid off on our butts, into the snowy bushes below. You bounced onto the stone walk and knocked yourself out. I saw your head bounce once—and then blood went everywhere. I found the jeep keys in your pocket, and I was going to drive us out of here—but but I ... I panicked, Seven ... I'm so sorry ... I thought I heard something in the bushes, so I dragged you back in here,” she said, voice cracking in guilt. “I dragged you back in here,” she said, bubbling up in bouts of tears and nervous giggling.

He was a little bit unnerved by her, but he didn't want to upset her further. "It's okay ..." he said. "I mean, it'll be alright. Let's just get out of here ... right away. Maybe Faye finally got the message--and she's going to leave us alone now," he said, knocking on the headboard.

"Well, clearly you've given her some sort of signs you were interested. Why else would she be acting so crazy?"

"I swear to you, after I fell out of love with her, she wouldn't have any of it ... She wouldn't listen. I told her I only loved one person, and that was you."

Eva studied his face for honesty.

After a few tense moments, she stuck up her little finger and said: "Well then, Mr. Wolf? What time is it?"

He smiled, his spirit rising once more. "It's seven," he said, and lassoed her finger with his own.

"Can we leave now, then?" she said, pouting. "I don't want to be here even one more minute."

He went to the window and studied the shadow-torn edges of French's Forest.

Some stubborn darkness still clung there, to the branches at the fringes—but when the day finally turned, it would soon be fast and bright

upon them.

“It's still night in the wood, but I think we'll be alright up on the highway,” he said.

“Do you think she's had enough?”

“It's hard to say ...”

Eva closed her eyes. Her migraine continued to throb.

When she opened them again, through the picture window, she saw Faye and Ax swimming through the wood.

She opened her mouth to say something, but she could not talk—caught up in the horror of the sight.

Seven saw the look in her eyes. “What is it?”

He turned about and saw Faye too. Malevolent in her tone of terror, she cackled evilly: “*Seven, come show me your Lucky Hands. Show me your Lucky Hands, Seven ...*” she chanted madly. “Ok then ... Run for jeep,” he said, almost casually.

Eva nodded gravely, and handed him the keys.

They dashed for the front door, but at the last second, she looked over her shoulder once more.

Her eyes settled on Faye, and suddenly, she found herself entranced by the seductive sight of

the siren.

Seven tugged at her wrist, about to sprint out of the door--but she wasn't budging.

"Come Eva, come on ... What? What is it?"

Eva felt an off-beat pattern in her heart and let her gaze linger all around Faye's curves—when in a flash of total remembrance, all of her childhood dreams flooded back to her:

When Eva was a little girl, having just turned the age of seven, she began having strange dreams at night.

There was a murder of crows painted on her bedroom wall, and they started cawing at night.

The fifty birds were illustrated as a part of a haunted forest scene, with a panther overlooking the view, in the foreground, nearer her bed—and the mystique of a black magic wood looming in the distance.

The odd thing about the crows, however, was that they all had human faces—and the fact that she could hear them cawing in her sleep.

Some of the faces were babyish—and others were wrinkled and whiskered—but as a collective, they appeared to be of the same face, at different stages of age.

What was even weirder was, Eva felt as if

the face was hers, if she were a boy.

Together, the grotesque hybrids formed one uncanny avian strain.

Whenever Eva turned out the lights, she heard them cawing—on top of coyotes howling from deeper off, into the woodland.

The trees in the mural ran up the side of a sea of rambling hillocks, to the darkly crowned peaks of a distant wood, which parted the clouds with jagged boughs—to the height of a promontory, where a sign read: 'Hawk Point'.

Whoever painted the mural had autographed it: E. J..

The there was the panther. Eva imagined that whoever had painted the picture, had put the panther near the bed a guardian.

She knew for sure at least, from the markings on the floor beneath the bed-legs, that someone else had slept there before.

Occasionally, she would close her eyes and pretend to sleep, only to sneak a quick peak and catch the panther casting back at her—as a mother might, overlooking her sleeping offspring.

This carried on for some weeks, until finally, she found the courage to say: “Are you real?”

The panther looked surprised—and suddenly furrowed of brow.

It paced about a bit, anxiously huffing-- until finally sitting and calmly responding: "Yes child, I am real."

"You're not in my imagination?" Eva asked.

"No child, I am not."

"Then why do you only come out at night?" she asked.

The panther looked puzzled at first, then shook its head. "It is you, dear child, that only comes out at night ..."

Eva frowned. "Then where do I go in the daytime?" she asked, growing very confused.

The panther pondered its response for many long minutes.

"Dear child ... During the daylight hours, humans slowly grow out of their dreams."

Eva hadn't pressed further, even though she didn't completely understand the panther's meaning.

As it would turn out, however, all of their conversations would be cryptic and circular like that—while still somehow allowing her to wake up feeling enlightened.

"What is your name?" Eva asked.

"I do not have one, dear child."

"Then I will give you one ... Hmmm, let me see," she said, tapping her lips. Her gaze trailed

along the bookshelf on the other wall. “I know!” she said. “I’m going to call you Cindy!”

It became habit then, that when Eva couldn’t sleep, Cindy would keep her up, telling her endless stories about French’s Forest.

Cindy said French’s Forest was where dead people went to sleep—and where the living came to dream.

She told her that beautiful fantasies bloomed there—along with fearsome nightmares.

She called it the ‘Wood of the Subconscious’.

She said that, in French’s Forest, anything could happen—and everything did happen.

Humans could even meet there, she said, by divining in their dreams, if they were so spiritually connected.

Needless to say, Little Eva was terribly impressed by all of this, and she found herself growing increasingly curious about the mysterious wood known as French’s Forest.

After all, she was the only child of a single mother who worked days, nights—weekends--and most Christmases—and so she was always left craving a little more adventure in her innocent life.

Escape from the poverty and depression of her normal reality was a sure-fire bait for her.

*"Will you take me, Cindy?" she asked.
"Please?!" she begged—fronting her best puppy-dog eyes.*

Cindy shook her head. "I think it's a bad idea for a little girl to go fooling around in French's Forest," she said.

"Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw! Naw!" the blackbirds cawed in unison, chiming in on the conversation—supporting Cindy's doubts.

"You can't escape from your problems, Eva ... You should help your mom out around the house more. You know she loves you like her own daughter."

Eva began to cry.

"Ok, ok ... Please, don't cry, dear child ... It's not the end of the world ... You're better off here, in the real world—confronting your problems, instead of getting run over by them. They will only get worse if you ignore them, Eva."

Eva nodded, tears stemming off. "I know, but if I never get out of here even just once, I won't know what the rest of the world is like," she said.

"I'll end up old and cynical, just like my mom, cutting people's hair at York Cutz ..."

"Poor girl, life shouldn't be so hard on such an angel like you."

"Please, Cindy, just take me to French's Forest! Just one peek, I promise! I swear I'll

never go back there again ... I pinky swear ... ”

Cindy looked doubtful. “Well, I guess I can't really stop you then, child. You're probably safer knowing the truth about your powers, anyway--or else you may just stumble cross-planes on your own someday, and get yourself killed ...

“Listen, Eva, French's Forest is a dangerous place. You have to stick to the paths--and always, always ... wear a watch. Without a watch, you'll lose track of time entirely—and become forever lost to the crooked trees.”

Eva nodded gravely. She recognized the tone of key advice.

“It happened before, my dear child, to the little boy, Evan Jackman, who lived here, before you ... The boy who painted this mural ... He was a prodigy, you see ... a savant artist—magician, natural mystic seer ... He painted a path into French's Forest on his bedroom wall ... We are what remains of his dreams, little Eva,” Cindy said.

The human-faced crows beat their wings in a low-key support of the statement. Eva did not immediately grasp that they were fifty little Evans.

The biggest blackbird, with the long gray beard of a sorcerer, whom Eva called King Knight, spoke: “Caw! Caw! Caw! We found his pocket-watch on the end-table one day ... and we

knew he had ventured into French's Forest for the last time ... Caw! Caw!"

Cindy resumed: "I went in looking for him, on the long-shot he wasn't lost--but we would never find him again. His father was so heartbroken, especially not knowing what had happened to his boy, thinking him kidnapped—that he eventually committed suicide. He hung himself in his closet."

"Caw!" King Knight took over again: "We were so disillusioned by losing him, that ever since you moved in, we've been considering convincing your mother to paint over us for good, to seal us off from this world forever, once more--with one heavy wash—and let it be done."

"Let it be done!" the murder sang. "CAW! CAW! CAW!!! LET IT BE DONE! LET IT BE DONE! CAW! LET IT BE DONE!!!"

"Stop it," Cindy snapped. "That would mean our end." But then she looked guilty. A heartbeat later, she shook her head and said: "But they're right, it's the truth."

"We are responsible for what happens to you ... If we let you use us as a medium to access French's Forest, then we ourselves will become responsible for you, as accomplices to your downfall, as the instruments of your transmission to that world."

"If we paint over ourselves, however, we'll close the two planes off from each other altogether for good--and spare you Evan's fate."

"Please, no, I need you, Cindy ... You are my only friend," Eva cried.

"Easy child, not to worry," Cindy said.

"Travelers to the other side need to find their own way there, anyway. Even with our help, you would need to follow your own steps there."

"Ok, just tell me how then ... How do I get there?" Eva persisted. "WHERE IS FRENCH'S FOREST?" she commanded, turning an inch angry.

Cindy sighed.

After a long silence, when even the murder had stopped its racket—she finally revealed the secret of how to get to French's Forest:

"All you must do, little Eva, to find French's Forest, is to just close your eyes, and let your mind drift, and go back to a place where your deepest self lurks in your subconscious underbrush—then rise up high, to the zenith of clarity, over the crown of the trees in your head—and you will see a light there, that is the sun of eternity--which will drown you out in a white energy—until you become supercharged with phosphorescence.

"Now, simply say the words seven times:

*'French's Forest, French's Forest ...
French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest,
French's Forest ... French's Forest form for me ...
French's Forest, French's Forest ... French's
Forest, form for me ... French's Forest, French's
Forest ... French's Forest, form for me ... French's
Forest, French's Forest ... French's Forest, form
for me ... French's Forest, French's Forest ...
French's Forest, form for me ... French's Forest,
French's Forest ... French's Forest, form for
me ... "*

Eva opened her eyes again, and she was walking on a grassy path, cropped in slate and water-gardens, that led to a plain, where French's Forest began.

She spotted some colorful birds at the fringe, but also some prowling eyes. She heard some beautiful sylvan songs, but also some blood-curdling wails strident.

She would get so close, then retreat to her waking life, until the next night, when her eyes closed again, and she repeated the words seven times once more.

Gradually, she began to explore the wood a little more each day, until at last it came to be like her second home.

Her mother would always ask why she spent so much time in her room, and she would

say she was reading—but really, she was living another life, abroad—on another level—where myriad fables unfolded--and she found her life's calling in a crush on a boy from a far land.

She had no idea at the time, of course, that French's Forest or Seven were real—and only miles from where she lived in New London.

She first met him in the stream, on the summer solstice—under a majestic canopy of constellations. She first marveled at his peculiar, adventurous ways—and how he was so lost in himself—that he was consumed by the stories of French's Forest.

He was a loner, yet his imagination was rich—and she loved him for that.

More characters occupied his mind than his outward life itself—leaving him fully content with his social existence, enough to live happily alone for good.

Indeed, it was first this purity of heart that she grew to adore in him.

But her passion became obsessive, and she started stalking him, using him—and playing with his mind in a sadistic web of cruelty and love, in order to fill the hollowness that she felt in life back home.

The boy became her imagination's plaything, whom she taunted and teased,

romanced and ridiculed—seduced and tormented.

The boy's name was Seven--and he called her ... Lady Faye.

The terrible truth came over Eva like a cataclysm.

She had drawn the blinds on her dream-life as Lady Faye—and she had let her underbelly go on without her.

Her secret's every card was one-by-one flipped across the table of her mind—as she reframed past events of her waking life.

She saw now that, meeting Seven in New London was merely a subconscious recognition of an old childhood toy.

She was Seven's ex, Lady Faye of French's Forest.

She felt herself surfacing, as if from a deep sleep.

She was the other woman from the woods—from Seven's past.

She felt her spirit drain from her very spine and limb.

She fainted, crumpling to the floor in a limp pile.

Seven rushed to her side.

Out the picture window, in the forest, Faye dematerialized—returning to the phantom shadows of Eva's clouded mind.

Seven carried Eva over his shoulder outdoors.

“Leave us alone, Faye!” he barked into the woods. “Can’t you see she’s better for me? Can’t you see we love each other?”

Faye growled from the clouds. “*Oh ... I am so happy for you,*” she said, her voice dripping on the wind in sheets of rich sarcasm. “*But what do you know of love?*” she boomed from above.

Her face appeared on the moon, and the clouds started spitting black oil all over the clearing—as she cackled wildly.

“You are half-mortal,” she cried, mockingly. “You know you will die someday, so you behave as if you must settle in affairs of the heart, before your opportunity passes away ...

“We true immortals, however, we do not care for the silly hollow tricks of the tongue, like love or marriage. Its just a device to crutch the insecurity of a weak mind, who knows its days are numbered.”

“But you loved me!” Seven shouted in frustration. “You said we were different!” he said. He marched with Eva over to the jeep.

“You are such a simple mortal thing,” Faye bellowed. “I don’t know why I even bother with you, really ...” she said, but the rains let up a notch—and it was clear that her feelings for him

hadn't faded. He could sense it in his veins.

"Oh why, oh why do I put up with your cheating ways, Seven ... ?" she said, blood-curdling modulations--echoing off the trees.

"I never meant you bad will," Seven growled back at her, kicking the trick passenger-side jeep door open—and loading Eva in. "But we haven't been together for years. Yet you continue to haunt my days," he cried. "The least you owe me is this!" he said. "I deserve to love Eva!"

The black rain intensified again, and Faye vanished from the moon-face.

Circling around the jeep, Seven suddenly braced himself against the hood, having hit an emotional wall—as if, deep down, it hurt him to scorn Faye.

Her pain was still his, and vice versa—for while his true love was with Eva--whenever he thought of Faye, his impulse was toward her the same.

He had too many memories hard-wired to exploring the bush in his youth—spending his time with Faye.

"You will never get away, Seven," he heard her say from within. "Every night that you go to sleep, I will be right by your side. If you leave French's Forest with that bitch today, I will haunt you for the rest of your life."

He almost started sobbing, but wiped tears up quick to focus on saving Eva—if not himself—from Faye's wicked grasp.

He slid into the jeep behind the wheel, and buckled Eva up but not himself.

"I'm getting us out of here," he said--breathlessly.

He twisted the ignition. Sparks fired, the engine turned—and they carved out of the lot in a plume of dust and popping stones.

As he pulled onto the highway, a flash of light bounced across the hood—and he jumped in his seat--but it was just the morning sun casting across them, through a new break in the clouds.

Every little thing was setting him off. Even the hawks overhead were making him jittery. But the further away they got, his heart-rate did slowly relax—and he began to think they just might make it after all.

But Faye was amorphous and vengeful—and he was confident, if she wanted him, she would have him—dead or alive.

Flying down the highway, he closed his eyes briefly, shaking his head gently--side-to-side--trying to clear his mind with the old mantra he used to chant while lost in French's Forest:
'Leaning-tree lead me to the River Payne ...
Leaning-tree lead me to the River Payne ...

Leaning-tree lead me to the River Payne ... ”

He pictured himself hopping across high stones in the rapids, and all worry of Faye disappeared.

He shifted into fifth and put the pedal flush with the mat, as they flew along through the trunks down the highway.

He didn't look back as they raced madly along. He skidded on the gravel shoulder a few times while his eyes were closed—as he let thoughts of Faye float away.

He kept the wheel straight, reciting his mantra three times—and this seemed to be enough to cover the trail of his thoughts.

They were half-way out of the woodland already.

He began to relax, heartbeat easing--but suddenly his mind suspended on the central question: *How long, how far—and to what distance could Faye find him?*

He knew that he could only run for so long. *Would she haunt him forever?* he worried. *Was that his fate?*

Eva groaned and shifted in her seat, gradually regaining lucidity. She came back to the situation, realization dawning on her face in extremes of rapid-fire emotion--spanning fear to fortune—about the situation her

subconscious had gotten her in.

“Where is she?”

“Shhh ...” Seven said, blowing on his finger. “*She's gone again ...*”

“What happened?”

“The second you fainted, she just vanished.”

Her head throbbed. “Did something hit me?”

“You went down like a stone. I almost had you.”

“It hurts like hell,” she said.

She remembered then that some great epiphany had been upon her, but no good neuron could bring it back, and she gave up trying.

She figured it would come back to her if it was important.

“Please don't stop,” she said, squeezing his knee. “Keep driving--and let's never go back ... ever again ...”

“That's a deal, babe. Everything's going to be okay now, I promise you that.”

“Promise we don't stop before we hit New London?”

“I promise.”

“Pinky swear?”

Their little fingers found the other.

“Eva, I'm really sorry that I put you through

all that.”

A long silence fell heavy on them both.

Finally, Eva said: “No more lies?”

“Never again.”

The thunder in her head was rapidly returning to migraine proportions. “I think those codeine your mom gave me are wearing off—but I’m still slipping in and out.”

“I know, but try to stay alert—I can’t promise you we’ve seen the last of Faye yet.”

They drove on at a reckless clip.

Eva drifted in-and-out of sleep for a time, before Seven noticed something in the rear-view mirror.

At first it was just a dot on the hill behind them, but he could feel Faye’s presence catching up to them.

He turned to Eva, but she was asleep again.

He smelled burning rubber—and saw in the rear-view mirror that a tire had blown.

The remaining shreds thrashed about, as the rim gouged the road—sparking in a long snaking line.

The steering wheel started to wobble.

The sky waxed to black, and Seven once more began to wonder if they would even make it out of French’s Forest alive.

In the rear-view mirror, he saw Faye and

Ax flying up the highway behind them.

Bolts of lightning started raining down all around them. He felt a thud on the roof, and the jeep rocked.

He lost control—skidding from one shoulder to the other and back again—before finally finding the broken line.

“Seven, stop ...” Eva murmured in her sleep. “Stop, Seven,” she said, but he could tell she was still dreaming.

Then suddenly, she sat bolt-upright--wide-eyed, yet still fully asleep—screaming: “STAAA-AAAW-P!!!” She put her hands out in front of her to punctuate the command.

Just then, a deer dashed out from the trees, across the highway--and Seven slammed on the breaks.

He skidded in the oil slick, striking the fawn and spinning about--rear-end into the ditch.

He tried driving out, but the ground was too wet—and he just ended up digging them deeper.

He jumped out, pulled Eva free—hoisted her over his shoulder—and marched into the wood.

French's Forest was his turf, as much as it ever was Faye's—and he knew it like the lines on a leaf.

He started toward Evyl Falls.

There

was a dangerously narrow path down the side of the cliff-face, but if they made it, he would wade into the River Payne--and float on flotsam all the way out to the county line.

Along the way, when his will grew weak, he kept reminding himself how much he loved Eva—and how great life would be again, if they made it out alive.

A hundred yards into the trees, he heard Faye in the distance. He turned and saw her where the jeep was ditched.

He pressed on, fear cascading across his being—body breaking at the brink of exhaustion.

“Come back, Seven,” he heard. “Come back and show me those Lucky Hands that I’ve been hearing sooo much about.”

He looked back again, and saw Faye morphing into the form of a fawn with a human face.

Now with four legs, she would quickly close the distance between them.

Eva woke, mumbling to Seven to put her down—and he found a fallen tree where they hid.

“What--?!”

“--Shhh ...” he hissed, pressing two fingers to her lips. He pointed silently across the way, through a stand of saplings, where he had last seen Faye.

But he blinked twice. “Where did she go?” he whispered.

He cast his gaze about in every direction, sure that Faye was still in striking distance, at some other angle—about to engage in a surprise attack.

“Where?” Eva said, looking around.

But French's Forest had grown still again. Even the squirrels were restful in their boughs.

Even the birds were low-key in their sylvan diddies.

Faye had simply vanished, and he wasn't sure why.

“We have to get to the Falls and find the old trail down ... It's probably grown over by now ... Can you walk?”

“I think so.”

She hobbled part-way, then he started piggy-backing her the remainder.

She grew heavier as she grew sleepy again, dragging down their pace—and just when he'd lost her to the dream-world once more, he heard sticks snapping behind them.

He looked back to see Faye the Fawn almost upon them.

He broke into a weak sprint, running himself ragged on sheer will. Faye was only a dozen yards behind, and he sensed she would

overtake them before the falls.

Finally, he had spent the last of his strength, and was about to give up, when he tripped and fell forward.

Eva flipped over his head, and landed between two shrubs that had hid the mouth of the old trail.

“Ohhh ... I'm going to be sick ...” she said, as if waking from a very bad dream.

Seven looked back, but Faye was gone again. He wet his hands in the shallows of the Payne—and ran them over Eva's hair--as she heaved to the side.

She rolled up onto her knees, grimacing in the pain.

Seven listened intently for Faye, but all he saw was the empty woods—and all he heard was Evyl Falls crashing far below.

Eventually, weak and wracked by the vomiting, Eva grew still again—and her eyes remained closed.

“Eva, we should go, okay? ... Come on, you can sleep later ... Are you going to be okay?”

“Shhh,” she said. “Just give me a minute,” she whispered, trailing off. “Don't move me ...”

“But we really gotta go ...”

But Eva's eye-lids twitched, as if she were already far away.

At the same moment, Seven felt Faye's presence from across the Payne rapids—and he looked over to see her materialize there, on the other side—in her sinewy silver skin and red mane.

“I've had enough of playing this game with you, Seven,” she said, in his mind. She paced back and forth.

“I'm not playing any game,” he thought back at her.

“Those Lucky Hands were never meant for anyone else but ME boy—and yet you always chased any tail that crossed your nose ... How badly you've treated me, Seven, when I was always so devoted to you. How easily I could simply squeeze the life from your lying, cheating throat ...”

“I was always upfront about my feelings ...” Seven thought. “You were the one who always played with the boys at the Peckham Farm.

“DON'T TWIST YOUR LIES ON ME, BOY!!!” Faye boomed. “Leave the bitch be ... and I will dispose of her as I wish ...”

“No Faye!” Seven protested.

“Yes, boy--and you will be mine again ... !!! You will be mine again ... NOW!!!”

She threw up one hand, and Ax sprang

from the wood-pitch into the Payne.

Seven picked Eva up again—who moaned, drifting in and out. “Time to go babe ... It's now or never ...”

He stepped through the bush, to the edge of the cliff-face--and looked over to see Ax darting toward them, under the shallows of the Payne—preparing to strike.

Across the river, Ella appeared from the woods behind Faye, and the two of them started circling each other.

Ella lunged as Lady Faye launched fifty spears of light from her fingertips in Ella's chest.

Ella growled from agony, throwing her weight onto Faye, clawing her to the ground. Together, they rolled into the river, lost from sight beneath the eddies.

Teetering on the edge of the promontory, with Eva on his back—Seven closed his eyes and said: “Leaning-tree Lead me to the River Payne ... Leaning-tree lead me to the River Payne ... Leaning tree Lead me to the River Payne ...”

Just as Seven stepped from the edge, Ax struck at them from the river. They were out over open space—and the snake followed them down—careening far down below—to where Evyl Falls broke under rock and foam.

Eva awoke mid-free-fall.

Ax slithered behind them at an equal rate.
The deadly whirlpools hurtled toward them
all.

Seven and Eva surfaced at the bottom. He
pulled her to shore.

Dragging her onto the nearest slip of
grass--he started administering mouth-to-mouth
resuscitation.

As his lungs filled hers with life, and she
was gradually revived, he kept glancing all around,
alert for Ax or Faye to reappear.

Between breaths, sensing a danger
present—he examined the reeds where they parted,
and surmised Ax was closing in.

On the seventh breath, he saw Faye's face
floating in the shallows close by—only to
disappear again, getting swallowed up by the
churning abyss.

Eva coughed up blood and water, rolling
onto her side. “We're alive?” she said
incredulously between hacks.

“Barely,” he said.

She closed her eyes again—and suddenly,
Ax struck out from the river edge—coiling around
Seven's leg—dragging him back into the deadly
flow.

Eva opened her eyes, but he was gone.
“Seven!” she cried, but she was still too weak--

reaction-time handicapped.

By the time her knees were under her again, all that remained of Seven and Ax were rings on the surface.

“Seven! NO!!!” she cried futilely. Her adrenaline quickly ratcheted up to high alert then—and she flushed with raw determination, just to stay alive.

Meanwhile, beneath the waves, Seven's mortal struggle with Ax ended as quickly as it began, as the snake suddenly stiffened, loosening its grip—releasing Seven back to the surface.

Ax just drifted off into the sightless murky distance—re-merging with Eva's unconscious.

Seven clawed his way back above water. He broke the face, choking and gasping for air. Once on shore, Eva helped him crawl the rest of the way up the delta.

“What happened?” she said.

“I don't know, he just let me go ...”

“I thought you were dead ...”

He nodded. “Me too ... I don't understand it ... Maybe it was running on adrenaline after the shock from the fall killed it ... Let's just hope our luck stays,” he said, but there was no wood to knock on.

He held up his pinky finger instead—still catching his breath—while trying to remain calm.

She grinned grimly--curling her fingers into his.

They followed the river out into the countryside, far away from French's Forest—and Faye's influence.

They walked on, talking about the mundane things they would enjoy now, living happily ever after at last in New London. They even grew amused at how French's Forest would soon seem like a bad dream.

Finally, they climbed a steep, thorny embankment—up onto Highway 9, where they hitch-hiked back into New London on a chick \en truck.

When they reached the city, they rented a room for the night.

Not long after they were settled into bed, Eva's eyes were about to close--and she said: “Seven ... I just had the craziest idea ...”

“Really? Is that a good thing?” Seven said, a little exasperated by the proposal, after the day that they had just had.

“We should go skating tonight ... Right now!”

“What?”

“Listen to me, just hear me out ... Instead of closing our eyes, let's get back up and finish this day off right. Let's just be crazy for once, Seven--

and seize the moment. Let's go back to the beginning, Seven ... Let's start it all over again."

Seven laughed. This was the old Eva returning to him now.

"It's safe right?" she said.

"Well, yeah ... Faye is bound to French's Forest ... I'm sure of it. As long as we don't go back there, we'll never see her again. It's all behind us now, babe."

"We can go wherever else in the world you want, okay?" she said, pouting.

"Don't worry, I'm okay with it. I really am. I'm looking forward to spending the rest of my life without ever seeing Faye again," he said.

Eva frowned. "But we have no skates ..."

"Hmmm ... We'll find a couple, I'm sure," Seven said. "We'll offer them cash for their skates ..."

He got a devilish grin on him, and without needing to exchange further words--Eva uncurled his plot, nodding in concurrence.

They dressed up and scuttled themselves down to the park rink, where they approached the first pair they found—who turned them down.

They tried a few other sets, before finding a match for their bargain.

Seven happily paid six bills for four skates.

"I can't believe you did that!" Eva squealed

afterward, scrambling to put the faded pink ones on.

Seven's pair were old and tight, and he struggled for a time to get a foot in.

Eva circled the rink twice, waiting for him.

"C'mon slow poke."

"Hold up, I'm coming."

"Seven ..."

"Yes Eva?"

"Were we dreaming? Did that all really happen?"

"It really happened ..."

He was finally up and skating now.

They fell into a rhythm together.

"Seven ..."

"Yes Eva?"

"Will you always love me—even when we're old?"

"Yes Eva. I will always love you—no matter what."

"Seven ..."

"Yes Eva?"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes Eva."

"Seven ..."

"Yes Eva?"

"You're sure we're not just dreaming?"

"I'm sure," he said. "But wait ... if you

really want proof--there's only one sure-fire way to find out if we're dreaming or not ...”

“How?”

“Just one ... little ... pinch!” he said, a mischievous look overtaking his face.

“Oh, no ... no, I'm skating,” she squealed.
“I could fall ...”

“Aww, let me pinch you just once, and we'll know for sure if we were dreaming, right ...?”

“Wait ... Why don't you just pinch yourself?” she objected.

“Nah, I want to pinch you,” he said.

“Aiiiii!!!” Eva cried, sensing Seven would suddenly pounce--and she skated away.

Seven chased her, swerving and threading through the other skaters. He managed to pinch her right butt cheek just once—and she squealed and skated off again.

“Okay, okay!” he called after her through laughter. “Let's just pinch each other at the same time then ...”

“Let's just pretend it was all a dream ...”
Eva said, turning and skating backward in front of him.

A shooting star speared the gem-studded sky overhead.

They stopped and gawked up at the evidence of cosmic eternity.

Touching each other gingerly for balance, neither of them was really thinking anything at all—but just happily existing in the moment as one—for they knew deep down that none of it would ever really last.

They were in those moments you never got back—that vanished faster than they came to pass.

“Oh, I wish it was all a dream!” she said.

“Promise we never go back?”

“Never again, Eva. It's just you and I now. You and I ... and the universe,” he said, smiling.

Overhead, a shooting star illuminated Orion's sword—as Sirius growled in the heavens.

They spun together as one, coming to a complete stand-still in the crisp, calm heart of the night.

Embracing under the cosmos, they grew oblivious to the other skaters circling around--neither of them willing to let the other go--out of body, sight—or mind.

They kissed once more—and their trembling lips remained virtually unbroken for the balance of the night--as if it were their last chance on earth to be in love.

